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**Editorial**

With growing inequalities, social unrest, and threats of nuclear conflict, the world is badly in need of peace and unity. It is in this challenging context that Pope Francis has released his fourth encyclical under the title *Dilexit nos* (Latin for ‘He loved us’). It is dedicated to the theme of human and divine love as embodied in the Heart of Jesus.

Why is there so much hostility and inhumanity in our world? The Pope’s diagnosis is: a loss of the values of the heart. In a time of social anxiety and in this age of artificial intelligence, he argues, ‘we need to start speaking once more about the heart’ (#9). Many will agree with the comment on depleted personal and communal life: ‘the heart makes all authentic bonding possible, since a relationship not shaped by the heart is incapable of overcoming the fragmentation caused by individualism. Two monads may approach one another, but they will never truly connect. A society dominated by narcissism and self-centredness will increasingly become “heartless.” This will lead in turn to the “loss of desire,” since as other persons disappear from the horizon we find ourselves trapped within walls of our own making’ (#17). Will this surprising counter-cultural message be heard?

The Pope goes on to recommend the great staple of pre-Vatican II devotion, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which has a restricted place in today’s liturgy and catechesis. Wisely, he begins with the loving words and deeds of Jesus as found in the Gospels. ‘Whenever Jesus healed someone, he preferred to do it, not from a distance but in close proximity…. Once he even stopped to cure a deaf man with his own saliva (cf. Mk 7:33), as a mother would do, so that people would not think of him as removed from their lives’ (#36).

He unrolls a panorama of saints’ visions of the Sacred Heart across the centuries. Sceptics and critics may find it out of touch or delusional to embark people on this popular ‘devotion’ to the heart of Christ; but the Pope secures its doctrinal foundations: ‘what we contemplate and adore is the whole Jesus Christ’ (#48). Protesting against over-intellectualization of faith, the Pope quotes many ardent saying of Thérèse de Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, and finds in them a boundless trust in divine mercy: ‘If I had committed all possible crimes, I would always have the same confidence; I feel that this whole multitude of offenses would be like a drop of water thrown into a fiery furnace’ (#137). Here is a source for the theology of grace and justification.

The Pope has attempted to build a theological and pastoral bridge between the riches of a neglected tradition and the gnawing problems of modernity. He brings human warmth and poetic sensitivity to this hermeneutical task.

We wish our readers every blessing of Christmas and new inspiration in 2025.

Constantin Konyi Kalamba

**Riemer Roukema and Joseph O’Leary**

**The Shepherds of Christmas: Beyond the Stereotype**

Dr Riemer Roukema is Professor emeritus of New Testament and Early Christianity at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht. He is a specialist in patristic interpretation of Scripture. His publications include *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity* (1999); *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma* (2010); *Micah in Ancient Christianity* (2019).

Every Christmas we are aware of their quiet presence, but do we ever really think of them? St Luke gives them a magnificent status as the first public witnesses of the Gospel, on the very night of the Savior’s birth, forestalling Matthew’s flamboyant stargazers, who steal the show when they arrive, crowding the crib with their robes and gifts (Mt 2:1-12). The story emphasizes that the shepherds are about their normal business, when something dramatically abnormal befalls them. Divine glory shines around them as the sudden visitation of a heavenly messenger overwhelms them. Like Gabriel on his appearances to Zechariah (Lk 1:11-20) and Mary (1:26-38), the unnamed angel dispels the shepherds’ terror and brings them tidings of comfort and joy: ‘Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord’ (2:11).

There is surely a symbolic significance in the shepherds’ activity of ‘keeping the watches of the night’ (*phulassontes phulaka t*ē*s nuktos*; 2:8). Long has Israel waited, never losing hope of the coming salvation, even in darkest hours. The shepherds take their watchful station in the same fields near Bethlehem where David, the ancestor of Jesus, had tended his flocks. These worthy, upright representatives of Israel are now charged with a solemn mission: to communicate the Good News to ‘all the people’ (2:10). As soon as they verify the sign the angel promised—the child in the crib—, they take up their task, which Luke, author of the Acts of the Apostles, describes in the language he uses for the Apostles’ mission. The shepherds become the first missionaries: ‘They spread the word concerning what had been told them (*egn*ō*risan peri tou rh*ē*matos tou lal*ē*thentos autois,* they made known about the word spoken to them) about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them’ (2:17-18). Compare Acts 5:20: ‘speak (*laleite*) to the people all the words (*rh*ē*mata*) of this Life.’ Acts 11:14: ‘he will speak words(*lal*ē*sei rh*ē*mata*) by which you will be saved.’ To speak (*lalein*) is the common word for preaching in Acts (e.g. 13:46, 14:25, 16:6, 32), as well as for glossolalia (2:11: 10:46; 19:6).

**The Simplicity of the Shepherd**

In Christmas sermons and meditations it has been said that at that time the profession of shepherds was despised by their Jewish compatriots. Shepherds were supposed to be unreliable, contemptible people. This idea served—and still serves—as a pious motif, namely: when Jesus is born, God sends his angels first of all to people who counted for nothing. Those who were excluded from the social order were the first to hear about Jesus’ coming. This fully agreed with Jesus’ later predilection for those who found themselves at the fringes of society. He took care of the ill, the handicapped, the insane, the poor, the sinners.

With the best theological intentions, Christians have imagined the shepherds as distinguished by poverty, squalor, and simple-mindedness, forming a stereotypical image of them which has become quite entrenched. Indeed, the shepherds are made into figures of fun for mischievous poets such as Richard Crashaw (c. 1613-1649):

Welcome—tho’ not to those gay flies,

Gilded i’ th’ beams of earthly kings,

Slippery souls in smiling eyes—

But to poor shepherds, homespun things,

Whose wealth’s their flocks, whose wit’s to be

Well read in their simplicity.

Or John Milton (1608-1674), who blends pagan and Christian in his ode ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (1629):

The shepherds on the lawn,

Or ere the point of dawn,

Sate simply chatting in a rustic row;

Full little thought they than [then]

That the mighty Pan

Was kindly come to live with them below:

Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,

Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep;

When such music sweet

Their hearts and ears did greet,

As never was by mortal finger strook,

Divinely warbled voice

Answering the stringed noise,

As all their souls in blissful rapture took:

The air such pleasure loth to lose,

With thousand echoes still prolongs each heav’nly close.

Milton’s shepherds ‘sate simply chatting in a rustic row,’ ‘simply’ here suggesting that their chat is frivolous and trivial; their sitting posture is less majestic than that of the truly watchful shepherd who stands or walks with his staff; it is taken over by Nahum Tate (1652-1715) in the hymn that has most influenced our image of the shepherds: ‘While shepherds watched their flocks by night/ All seated on the ground.’ However, paintings of the Annunciation to the Shepherds—such as those by Jacopo Bassano (c. 1560), Nicholas Berchem (1649), or Jules Bastien-Lepage (1875)—show the shepherds sitting or lying down.

From the 14th century, in *The Second Shepherds’ Play* in the Wakefield cycle of mystery plays*,* to the 20th, in W. H. Auden’s *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (1944)*,* the shepherds have been comic figures. This is predicated on the idea that they were of low social status, rustic bumpkins, put-upon proles. Indeed, their world is as narrow as that of their sheep:

Clinging like sheep to the earth for protection,

We have not ventured far in any direction.

Auden’s text was to be set to music by his friend Benjamin Britten, but only ‘A Shepherd’s Carol’ was composed (and unaccountably withdrawn by the composer). The lyrics are rather wacky: ‘If I were a Valentine/ and Fortune were abroad,/ I’d hypnotise that iceberg/ Till she kissed me of her own accord.’

Actually, the poets play on two aspects of ‘simplicity’—rustic backwardness on one hand, noble simplicity of spirit on the other. Milton upholds the latter aspect in *Comus* (1634), where shepherds are seen as the true aristocrats:

Shepherd I take thy word,

And trust thy honest offer’d courtesie,

Which oft is sooner found in lowly sheds

With smoaky rafters, then in tap’stry Halls

And Courts of Princes, where it first was nam’d

And yet is most pretended.

A shepherd appears in the eighth line of *Paradise Lost* (1667):Moses is strikingly identified as ‘That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed/ In the beginning how the heavens and earth/ Rose out of Chaos.’ Satan spying on Eden is compared to ‘a prowling wolf,/ Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,/ Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve/ In hurdled cotes amid the field secure’ (Bk 4); an implication is that the angels guarding Eden are shepherd figures. Abel is identified by his role as shepherd:

a shepherd next,

More meek, came with the firstlings of his flock,

Choicest and best; then, sacrificing, laid

The inwards and their fat, with incense strowed,

On the cleft wood, and all due rights performed:

His offering soon propitious fire from Heaven

Consumed with nimble glance, and grateful steam. (Bk 11)

The simple shepherds of Bethlehem inevitably make their appearance: ‘His place of birth a solemn Angel tells/ To simple shepherds, keeping watch by night;/ They gladly thither haste, and by a quire/ Of squadroned Angels hear his carol sung’ (Bk 12). What is descried in prophetic futurity here is recalled as past in *Paradise Regained* (1670), as Mary tells her son:

At thy Nativity a glorious Quire

Of Angels in the fields of Bethlehem sung

To Shepherds watching at their folds by night,

And told them the Messiah now was born,

Where they might see him, and to thee they came,

Directed to the Manger where thou lais’t. (Bk 1)

The dramatic potential of the two aspects of the shepherds is wonderfully realized in the old Wakefield play. First we are steeped in the details of their tough lives:

Such servants as I who work till we sweat

Eat our bread quite dry and that makes me fret;

We are often weak and weary when our masters sleep yet;

Late home and dreary, in food and drink we get

Less than our due.

Their clowning about leads to the touching climax where they offer the child three lowly presents, not gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but a bird, cherries, and a ball:

1st SHEPHERD

Hail, comely and clean! Hail, young child!

Hail, maker, as I mean, of a maiden so mild!

Thou has cursed, I believe, the warlock so wild;

That false guiler of vexation has himself been beguiled.

Lo, he merry is.

Lo, he laughs, my sweeting, A welcome meeting;

take my promised greeting: Have a bob of cherries.

2nd SHEPHERD

Hail, sovereign saviour, for thou hast us sought!

Hail, excellent child and flower, that all things hast wrought!

Hail, full of favor, that made all of nought.

Hail, I kneel and I cower. A bird have I brought,

Bairn that ye are.

Hail, little tiny mop,

Of our creed thou art top,

I would drink of thy cup.

Little day-star.

3rd SHEPHERD

Hail, darling dear, full of Godhead!

I pray thee be near when that I have need.

Hail, sweet is thy cheer! My heart would bleed

To see thee sit here in so poor a weed

With no pennies.

Hail, hold forth thy hand small;

I bring thee but a ball:

Have thou and play withal,

And go to the tennis.

MARY

The father of heaven, God omnipotent,

Set all in days seven, his son he has sent.

Conceived I him even through his might, as he meant,

And now is he born.

May he keep you from woe! I shall pray him do so. Tell of him as you go;

And remember this morn.

**Shepherds in Bible and Talmud**

Contrary to the entrenched image of shepherds as lowly rustic folk, when we look at the biblical and other evidence about the reality of shepherds’ lives, a surprisingly different picture emerges. In Scripture, shepherds are never despised. Their profession is a very honorable one. The righteous Abel, often seen as a type of Christ, kept flocks of sheep (Gen 4:2). We hear that Abram was very rich in livestock and had herders (Gen 13:2-7). His grandson Jacob had many adventures in his career as shepherd (Gen 29-30) and at the end acknowledged that God had been his shepherd all his life (Gen 48:15). Jacob’s sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, were familiar with what Milton in ‘Lycidas’ (1637) fondly calls ‘the homely, slighted, shepherd’s trade’ (see Gen 37). The two foremost leaders of the people of God, Moses and David, likewise began as shepherds (Ex 3:1; 1 Sam 16:11; 17:34-6).

In the beloved Psalm 23, ascribed to David, he too, like Jacob, calls God ‘my shepherd.’ The psalm uses an image of the shepherd as a calm and gentle leader, with deep authority and dignity; no suggestion of coarseness, dirt, despised social status. Likewise, the prophets compare God with a shepherd, in his unfailing care of his flock, his people (Is 40:11; Jer 31:10; Ez 34:11-16). When they speak about bad shepherds, the prophets mean the unrighteous kings of Judah and Israel, whom they confront with the role of good shepherds as the example to follow in their kingship (Is 56:11; Jer 2:8; 10:21; 23:1-4; Ez 34:2-10). In the Gospels, too, the image of the shepherd carries noble connotations, as in the image of a caring shepherd who goes in search of one lost sheep (Mt 18:12-13; Lk 15:3-5). The Johannine Jesus presents himself as ‘the good shepherd’ in opposition to mere ‘hirelings’ who do not care for the sheep (Jn 10:1-16). Elsewhere, Jesus is called ‘the chief shepherd’ (1 Pet 5:4) and ‘the great shepherd of the sheep’ (Heb 13:20), which recalls the prophets’ image of God as the faithful shepherd of Israel.

Nowhere do the Gospels say that at that time shepherds were despised by their compatriots. Philo of Alexandria (15–10 BCE-45–50 CE), a contemporary of Jesus and the Apostles, wrote: ‘Indeed, so good a thing is shepherding that it is justly ascribed not to kings only and wise men and perfectly cleansed souls but also to God the almighty’ (*De agricultura* 50).

The negative assessment of shepherds became entrenched in twentieth-century biblical scholarship, especially in Germany, on the basis of a venerable historical source, which however does not date from the time of Jesus. The scholars drew on ancient Jewish books that comprised rabbinic interpretations and debates. Rabbis were Jewish sages who were versed in the Scriptures of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (such as Job, the Psalms, and Proverbs)—forming the Hebrew Bible called the ‘Old Testament’ by Christians. A huge collection of such rabbinic books is called *Talmud,* which means ‘teaching’; it exists in two diverging versions, one from Babylonia and the other from Jerusalem or rather Palestine. Furthermore, there are numerous rabbinic biblical commentaries, named after the biblical books (e.g. *Bereshit Rabbah* on Genesis) or entitled *Midrashim*, and more treatises that were not included in the Talmud.

This vast literature is very complex and extremely confusing for uninitiated readers. Therefore, from 1924 to 1926 the learned German pastor Dr Paul Billerbeck published three fat volumes in which he had conveniently collected rabbinic traditions, translated into German and arranged as elucidations of the New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation. Furthermore, two other volumes of 1928 comprised studies of biblical subjects, freighted with rabbinic traditions. The better-known Professor Hermann L. Strack also lent his name to these five volumes. So, the reference to ‘Strack-Billerbeck’ was famous for decades, since by their work all German-reading theologians had an easy access to the vast and complicated rabbinic literature, tailored to the New Testament.

At Luke 2:8, where the evangelist introduces the shepherds keeping watch over their flock, Billerbeck presented several critical rabbinic testimonies on shepherds. Their profession was considered shameful, they were accused of pasturing their flock on territories that were not their own, so they were seen as thieves. People were discouraged or it was outright forbidden to buy wool or milk from them since they might have stolen it.

Dr Billerbeck and many subsequent biblical scholars used such ancient rabbinic traditions as ‘background’ to the New Testament. This implied that they ascribed the bad reputation of shepherds in rabbinic works to the shepherds whom Luke placed near Bethlehem when Jesus was born. For instance, the famous and once authoritative *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* followed Billerbeck’s view. In 1933 its first volume was published in German, edited by Gerhard Kittel. The sixth volume from 1959 contains the entry ‘shepherd’ (*poimen* in Greek), authored by the pious and respected Professor Joachim Jeremias. From 1964 to 1976 the complete ten-volume *Dictionary* was translated into English, so that theologians worldwide could learn that at the time of Jesus’ birth shepherds had a bad reputation, although the evangelist does not hint at their doubtful status at all.

**What was Missed and What has Changed**

In this use of rabbinic traditions one essential aspect was forgotten. Those Jewish books were written centuries after Christ. The first source presented by Billerbeck about shepherds as contemptible people is the Midrash (Commentary) on the Psalms. This work stems from circa 1000 AD. The negative view of shepherds is found in the explication of Psalm 23, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’! To be sure, for his interpretation the anonymous author invokes a rabbi from the third century. But was this reference reliable? Who knows? Seven centuries are a very long time. We should not be naïve about the reliability of such testimonies. In any case, even the third century cannot be used as ‘background’ to the New Testament Gospels, written in the last four decades of the first century.

Another, earlier testimony to shepherds in Billerbeck’s collection stems from a work in the Babylonian Talmud entitled *Sanhedrin* (25b / III, 3), which may be dated to circa 500 AD (it is notoriously difficult to date rabbinic works with some precision). It is said there that shepherds were added to the list of unreliable and therefore unacceptable witnesses in court. Even if a shepherd was blameless, he was still not admitted as a witness. This decision was an addition to an earlier work, the *Mishnah*, which can be dated fairly precisely, in this case, to circa 200 AD. The Mishnah also contains a treatise *Sanhedrin*, which is extensively commented on in the later Talmudic work of the same title. In the Mishnaic treatise *Sanhedrin* (3, 3) people exerting the following professions are not qualified to be witnesses, let alone judges: dice-players, usurers, pigeon-flyers, and traffickers in produce of the sabbatical year (when crops were deemed free to all, Lev 25:1-7). Shepherds are not mentioned here, for they were added only in a later comment on this prescription in the Babylonian Talmud. In the Mishnah from 200 AD and, therefore, in the older traditions included in it, shepherds do not have a bad reputation. So we may take it that far from having to face the paradox of the first witnesses to Christ being disqualified for the role, we can take it that there was in fact nothing to discredit their solemn testimony.

One might wonder why later on shepherds were added to the categories that were excluded from being called up as witnesses in court, though that is not our present question. Just a short note: perhaps shepherds were considered thieves because they pastured their flock on territories that used to belong to the commons, while the rich had appropriated these fields to themselves. This practice is attested already in Isaiah 5:8 and Micah 2:2, and it still happens to indigenous tribes that are chased away from their ancestral land.

The point is, that rabbinic works that were written a few or more than a few centuries after the birth of Jesus may not be used naïvely as evidence of the context of the New Testament. For several decades, however, Christian scholars did not take into account this insight. In the last fifty years the specialists in the field of biblical research no longer draw on the rabbinic sources in the same naïve way. Therefore, good biblical commentaries and handbooks of the last decades no longer say that in Jesus’ time shepherds were spurned by their compatriots. This view is simply outdated because there is no evidence for it. However, in older biblical commentaries, in popular and devotional books, in sermons, and on the internet this obsolete viewpoint is perpetuated by authors and preachers who echo what they heard from others; or they base themselves uncritically on older material, such as the widely available *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

It is still possible and justified to use later rabbinic traditions for the interpretation of New Testament texts or as a helpful comparison with them, but one needs to have a profound knowledge of these Jewish works in order to distinguish between what is really old and what is not. This is the expertise of specialists. Average theologians, priests, and preachers should be very cautious in consulting Strack-Billerbeck and commentaries that draw on it.

**The Dignity of the Shepherds**

The figure of the shepherd is imbued with special dignity for Christians, and nothing prevents us from thinking that this connects with the social dignity of that profession in the Jewish world of the time of Jesus. The first image of Jesus in Christian iconography is that of the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the new Abel, bearing his sheep on his shoulder. In the funerary art of the Roman catacombs, this represents his bearing the soul to heaven, or if he carries a goat he is purging the soul of goat-like taints. Helen Grixti (‘The Good Shepherd,’ European University Institute, 24 May 2024, online) notes that ‘images of the Hermes Criophorus, or the shepherd carrying a ram or a calf, appeared very early in Greek sculpture…. Just as the Greek Hermes, accompanying attendant to the underworld, relates to a safe passage and well wishes for an auspicious afterlife, the Good Shepherd symbolizes deliverance. However, while the Criophorus prepares his ram for sacrificial slaughter, the Good Shepherd protects his sheep from harm. Pagan representations of the shepherd on sarcophagi and in catacombs are thought to represent *humanitas* or *philanthrōpia*, the charitable and selfless qualities that both pagan and Christian communities valued.’ Sometimes the shepherd may have a set of pipes or a lyre at his side, evoking Orpheus, who stilled wild beasts as Jesus transforms our evil nature. The Good Shepherd figures in Christian literature of the time as well. In an apocalyptic writing of the mid-second century, *The Shepherd,* the narrator Hermashas a vision of a Christ-like shepherd, described as the ‘angel of repentance’ (*metanoia*) who gives him a string of mandates and parables. A simple and modest figure in the first centuries, the Good Shepherd becomes more stately in the era of Constantine and his successors, and loses his prominent place in Christian iconography.

Here, then, is another line to follow in building up a historical phenomenology of the figure of the shepherd. We have merely scratched the surface, but have perhaps found enough to justify an upstaging of the Magi by the humble shepherds. But all this is written for us, inviting us to imitate those first witnesses and missionaries.

What can I give Him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;

Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart. (Christina Rossetti, 1872)

**Philippe Capelle-Dumont**

***Descendit de caelis*: Kenosis and Covenant**

Philippe Capelle-Dumont, born in Paris in 1954, philosopher and theologian, is professor emeritus at the University of Strasbourg, honorary dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Institut Catholique de Paris, and president of the Académie Catholique de France. His many books center on the relations between faith and reason, also on phenomenology and the thought of Martin Heidegger.

*Being emptied of God’s form*

*is nothing other than the strength of divine power.*

—Hilary of Poitiers

*Kenosis* is the central matter of Christian theology. It tells it like it is, to the point of overturning some of its historical expressions. It has also haunted modern and contemporary philosophy, with no less radical effects. It haunts the thought of Hegel and Schelling, and of Simone Weil, Stanislas Breton, Gianni Vattimo, Paul Ricoeur, and Emmanuel Levinas. The potency of kenosis has traversed, and even more so, fueled centuries of speculative thought and existential consciousness.

But when kenosis is disconnected from its biblical coordinates, and no longer grounded in the narratives of God’s Covenant with his people, kenosis can tip over into abstraction and distortion, lending itself to many theoretical misunderstandings.

The central Pauline text, the hymn quoted in Philippians 2:5-11, must not be ripped from its context, from the entire narration of Christ’s saving work, which culminates in his obedience unto death and his exaltation to glory. Unlike Adam, Jesus did not snatch at ‘equality with God’ but humbly assumed his incarnate condition, or indeed actively inaugurated the incarnational economy by choosing to put aside ‘the form of God’ and to take on ‘the form of a slave.’

For this the hymn uses a startling verb: ἐκένωσεν, he ‘emptied’ himself. Kenosis literally means emptying: the divine Son in becoming incarnate emerges in the phenomenal realm as a vulnerable and wounded human figure, offered himself as servant for the salvation of the world. The ‘form of God’ in its eternal glory is beyond our grasp, but it is paradoxically revealed even in our human historical time when Christ steps forward in ‘the form of a slave.’ This emptying is not the annihilation of God, but the exact opposite: the Father’s eternal begetting of the Son is now shown forth in the mission of the incarnate Son. The fullness of divine life is seen in this sending of the Son on our behalf, and in the absolutely loving disposition with which it is enacted by the Son.

This Christo-logical event of kenosis obliges theo-logy to shape itself as a response to the stunning biblical datum. The kenosis is to be interpreted as the full establishment and realization of the divine-human Covenant. The theological reception of this unique event is not a matter of individual speculation, but calls forth the inspired reaction of the entire community and builds on this reaction. Peter’s words illustrate how the astonishing divine liberality continues in the action of the Spirit: ‘We and the Holy Spirit have decided’ (Acts 15:2). Against any monological narrative, whether religious or philosophical, divine or cosmic, kenosis opens up the broad dimensions of the Covenant, lived out in mutual listening, dialogue and *parrh*ē*sia*. This lifestyle brings the kenotic disposition to its ripe fulfillment, in line with Paul’s words as he introduced the kenosis hymn: ‘Let that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus.’

**The Patristic Concept of God Tested by the Kenotic Covenant**

This enactment of the kenotic Covenant was not immediately and fully assimilated by the tradition that nonetheless constituted and mapped it. For the ‘Fathers of the Church,’ one of the major theoretical difficulties concerned the articulation of the incarnational ‘event’ with the idea of an ‘immutable’ God, as shaped in Greco-Roman thought. A first solution is that used by St Athanasius of Alexandria against Arius. Athanasius (c. 295-373) builds on the Council of Nicaea (325), which marked a crisis and a breakthrough on this front. Rather than see the Son as a demi-god or the highest of creatures, in line with Platonist conceptions of a graded divinity, Nicaea asserted the full divinity of the Son, ‘true God from true God,… of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.’ His descent from heaven, ‘for us and for our salvation,’ then appears as an act of deliberate divine self-abasement: ‘He did not pass, then,’ says Athanasius, ‘from a less perfect to a more perfect state, but while he was God, he took the form of a slave, and by this assumption, he did not elevate himself, but became a slave’ (*Contra Arianos* 1.40).

In thus drawing the theological consequences of Nicaea, against fierce resistance from those who clung to the earlier subordinationist thinking, Athanasius provided an irrefragable foundation for later defenders of the union of divine and human in Christ: St Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444) against those who separated Christ’s humanity from his divinity, and St Leo (c. 400-461) against those who amalgamated the humanity and the divinity. Arians, Nestorians, and Eutychians faltered in various ways before the event of kenosis, the reality that God decided to make his eternal Logos *human,* fully entering the human historical world.

Cyril, fighting against Nestorian Christology, does not start from some lofty ‘transcendence,’ but from God's self-abnegation and the love that makes him incarnate. In becoming incarnate, God does not experience an increase in his being, but undergoes an abasement.[[1]](#footnote-1) Refusing to assimilate kenosis with the divine attributes, St Augustine (354-430) similarly says that God’s abasement is the beginning of his incarnation: ‘The Son of God is therefore by nature equal to the Father, but lesser by state (*habitu*)’ (*De Trinitate* 1.7.14), i.e. in his ‘human form (*skh*ē*mati*)’ (Phil 2:7). But could such affirmations, cautious as they are, be squared with the doctrine of divine immutability? Von Balthasar highlights the difficulty: ‘If we look back from the mature Christology of Ephesus and Chalcedon to the hymn of Philippians 2…, we can hardly help registering a “plus factor” in its archaic language—stammering out the mystery as this does—to which the established formulae of the unchangeability of God do not really do justice.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the context of this entirely new theological question, St Hilary of Poitiers (c, 310-c. 367) takes as his point of departure the conviction that everything of God occurs by virtue of God’s sovereign freedom: abiding in himself, he knows the power of his own will. The subject remains the same, but a division occurs that does not call into question the divine character of the Son: ‘He who bears the mark of the form of God, must necessarily bear within himself the entire image of God’ (*Id quod signatum in Dei formam est, hoc necesse est totum in se coimaginatum habere quod Dei est*) (*De Trinitate* 8.45). In his initial form as God and in the elevation of his form as slave, Christ ‘hid within himself’ (*se ipsum exinaniens et intra se latens*), so as not to overwhelm fragile and feeble human nature. Yet the divine power remained undiminished though hidden (*detrimentum non adtulit potestatis)*. ‘The boundless power moderated itself as far as was needed for its obedience unto bearing the body connected to it (*tantum se virtus incircumscribta moderaretur, in quantum oporteret eam usque ad patientiam conexi sibi corporis oboedire*’ (11.48). We can recognize the efficacity of the argument: God is so much God that he can renounce all his attributes. In Hilary’s arguments the patristic notion of immutability is saved while the reality of the Incarnation is honored.

In the background of Hilary’s discourse we may discern the presence of Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 253), ‘the first theologian to have made full use of’ the kenosis hymn’, as Gerald Bostock notes. The Kenosis of Christ ‘is interpreted as essentially an act of selfless love’ and is ‘a nodal point for Origen’s entire theology.’ ‘We must dare to say,’ Origen declared, ‘that Christ’s goodness appears greater and more divine, and truly in the image of the Father, when he humbles himself in obedience to the point of death...; it appears better in this way than if he had held his equality with God to be an inalienable good, and had refused to become a slave’ (*Commentary on John* 1.32). Bostock, a Methodist, finds that only Origen among the Fathers grasped the kenosis as a loving event. He quotes the quite kenotic hymn of Charles Wesley 1707-1788):

'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!

Who can explore His strange design?

In vain the firstborn seraph tries

To sound the depths of love Divine!

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,

Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father’s throne above,

So free, so infinite His grace;

Emptied Himself of all but love,

And bled for Adam’s helpless race:

'Tis mercy all, immense and free;

For, O my God, it found out me.

In much medieval theology the event of kenosis lost prominence, since its paradoxical force was subjected to the principle of perfection: as an expression of divine perfection and lordship, it no longer signified a divine descent to a condition of humiliation. Kenosis had no substantial place in many texts of medieval theology, because it did not square with the principle of divine perfection. The consequence was that kenosis appertains exclusively to the humanity of Jesus. To be sure, this deficiency brought with it an advantage: in refusing to make of kenosis an intra-divine process, this theology preserved the salvific and revelatory import of the Incarnation. Thus it honored, explicitly or implicitly, the divine-human covenant.

In St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), however, the unequivocal significance of the scriptural data is recognized: Christ freely chose the condition of servant, fully embracing all the weaknesses and limits of human nature. ‘The *exinanitio* of Christ thus includes all that, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas treats under the rubric of “defects” of the body (*defectus corporis*) and of the soul (*defectus animae*) that Christ voluntarily assumed, that is to say, his corporeal possibility, the innocent passions of his soul, and all that concerns his state of *viator* (*ST* III, qq. 14–15).’[[3]](#footnote-3) Aquinas gives three reasons for Christ’s self-abasement to our bodily condition: (1) it was fitting that Christ should bear the punishment of Adam’s sin from which he was to redeem us; (2) the weakness and suffering of his body confirmed faith in the Incarnation and refuted docetism (it is here that the Philippians hymn is quoted); and (3) by sharing our condition he could give us an example of patience (*ST* III, q. 14, a. 1).

Aquinas’s doctrinal synthesis is anchored in his frequentation of Scripture:

In his commentary on St. Paul, Thomas identifies the subject of the kenosis as the person of Christ (*Christus*) according to his divinity (*in forma Dei*), that is to say the Son as ‘true God’ (*verus Deus*) according to his ‘equality’ (*aequalitas*) with the Father. In other places, he designates the subject of the kenosis as the ‘Word of God’ (*Verbum Dei*), or the ‘Son of God’ (*Filius Dei*), or even simply ‘God’ (*Deus*). In accord with St. Cyril of Alexandria, the subject of the kenosis is also designated as the ‘Only-Begotten’ (*Unigenitus*) or the ‘true Son of God’ (*verus Dei Filius*). In every case, conforming to the tradition of interpretation dominant among the pro-Nicene Fathers, the preexistence of the Son is clearly underlined: ‘It is said that he was *in the form of God*; therefore, he was in the form of God before taking the form of a servant.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Hegel’s Neutralization of Kenosis**

Compared to these two moments, patristic and medieval, kenosis in the modern era, mainly with Hegel, takes on a new prominence. In Hegel’s eyes, *Entaüsserung* meant not only God’s renunciation of his titles and rights, but the absorption of his divinity in death: ‘God himself is dead,’ insisted Hegel,[[5]](#footnote-5) quoting a hymn long attributed to Luther but actually by the Lutheran poet and dramatist Johann Rist (1607-1667), whose chorales, notably ‘*O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort,*’are often used inBach’s cantatas. Rist’s text reads: ‘*O große Not! Gott selbst ist tot. Am Kreuz ist er gestorben; hat dadurch das Himmelreich uns aus Lieb erworbe*n’ (O great distress! God himself is dead. He has died on the cross; and by this means, out of love, has won heaven for us). The first strophe of this hymn, ‘*O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid,*’ comes from Friedrich von Spee, SJ (1591-1635). Rist’s ‘*Gott selbst ist tot’* (in the second strophe) is changed to the innocuous ‘*Gotts Sohn liegt tot*’ (God’s Son lies dead) in recent Lutheran hymnals.

Tertullian had long ago affirmed that in the Christian faith God has died, yet lives eternally: ‘*Bene autem, quod Christianorum est, etiam mortuum deum credere, et tamen viventem in aeva[[6]](#footnote-6) aevorum*’ (It is correct that Christians believe that even God has died, and yet lives unto the ages of ages) (*Adversus Marcionem* 2.16.3). He also used the phrase ‘*Deus crucifixus*’ (Crucified God), though in line with patristic theology he rejects the idea of a suffering of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Hegel makes divine kenosis a clue to the nature of being, in the ‘speculative Good Friday,’ which he introduces in a relatively early text, *Glauben und Wisssen*, 1802. Here the crucifixion of Christ and the feelings of devotion it arouses are treated as merely historical and empirical, whereas the truly significant passion and kenosis are that in which the securities of ‘dogmatic philosophy’ are overcome through grasping the radical nature of freedom (which he and Schelling at this time took to be the very nature of being):

But the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief [of the finite] purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment. Formerly, the infinite grief existed only historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that ‘God himself is dead’ upon which the religion of more recent times rests…. By marking this feeling as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical being (*Wesen*), or the concept of formal abstraction [e.g. the categorical imperative]. Thereby it must re-establish for philosophy the idea of absolute freedom and along with the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness…. The highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape.[[8]](#footnote-8)

According to Hegel, God leaves his self-identity behind; in his kenosis, he accedes to the ultimate difference from himself. We must therefore not maintain the process of a self-revelation of God in a simple self-identity with himself. The death of Christ as the negation of God’s very being might seem to undercut the reproach that Hegel and his theo-logy are frozen in a conception of pure identity. And yet, in considering his God, we remain struck by the relative, even negligible, nature of subjective particularity. Individual existence seems to be dissolved in God’s all-consuming Self as it comes to full self-realization. Humanity here only accesses its truth to the extent that it allows the Absolute Spirit to emerge within it. Where does its own consistency reside in these conditions? The biblical dialectic of freedom in which the free creature comes to exist as the image of its free Creator is avoided, pushed aside, abandoned. If the destiny of the human consists of being stripped of personal singularity for the benefit of a universal process, how can we speak of a salvation-for-humans, for the human individual?

What is at stake? The semantics of ‘necessity,’ which Hegel describes as a relationship between ‘in itself’ and ‘for itself,’ guides the divine movement of extreme negativity. In contrast, St Luke tells us that, as he was accompanying on the way to Emmaus the disciples who were disheartened by the failure of the death of the man from Nazareth, he, the risen Christ, taking his cue from the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and the prophets, said to them: ‘Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer?’ (Lk 24:26). This Lucan ‘it was necessary’ (ἔδει) hardly refers to the inherently eternal necessity of a divine process. Rather it indicates the logic of the play of grace in its overcoming of sin. By abolishing any distance between finitude and sin, Hegel undoubtedly condemned himself to failing to glimpse the true ‘necessity’ of God’s own commitment to the Covenant and the promise of his fidelity: a loving fidelity that seeks out, at the cost of death, the life of his creature gone tragically astray.

Basically, the extreme negativity of the Hegelian God, a moment as necessary as it is ephemeral in his being, is perhaps not as tragic as it seems. only one of the many aspects of God’s existence. By reducing the natural and human given to a moment of the divine Spirit, by diluting anthropology in theology, Hegel condemned himself to depriving man of instance that founds and grants meaning.

The kenosis thematized by Hegel is undoubtedly not as kenotic as it led him to believe. By neutralizing it, he could not conceive of a God who, instead of devouring the singularity of his creature in order to be, strips himself in order to promote the creature exclusively. To be sure, Hegelian kenosis, more than at the level of a ‘loss,’ is realized in the gift. But this gift of God is the gift of oneself to one’s Self. The end of God is neither man, nor even the Son, but God. The ‘let us pass to others,’ constitutive of kenosis, is altered in Hegel into an integrating ‘same’: if the Hegelian God is indeed marked by ‘alteration,’ he is not marked by ‘alterity.’ In other words, the alteration of the ‘Same’ in its negation does not satisfy the otherness of the other in its irreducible singularity. Hegel’s Logic has thus missed the logic of the Covenant.

**From Kenotic De-divinization to the Death of God**

Kenosis is at the heart of Luther’s theology with its ‘joyous exchange’ wherein Christ makes himself poor for our sake so as to enrich us with his righteousness and holiness. Nineteenth-century kenotic theologians of Lutheran descent, notably Gottfiried Thomasius (1802-1875) and W. F. Gess (1819-1891), attempted to give such thinking an impressive metaphysical foundation. Under Hegelian influence, they not only rejected the idea of divine immutability, but also took this rejection to its most extreme consequence: the subject of kenosis is not the one who has become ‘divine,’ the Incarnate, but the one who becomes man, the divine Logos himself. According to Thomasius, this is a deliberate self-limitation of the divine: abandoning the attributes pertaining to the immanent Trinity—omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence—the Son nevertheless retains the attributes pertaining to the economic Trinity—truth, holiness, love.[[9]](#footnote-9) Gess goes even further: disqualifying the distinction between relative and absolute attributes in God, he sees the divine Logos as the one who has renounced all God’s properties, even down to his divine consciousness; the Logos will recover this consciousness only gradually, as he becomes aware of himself as a human being.[[10]](#footnote-10)

But something that 19th century ‘Kenoticism’ did not dare to contemplate is proclaimed in the theology of the ‘Death of God in Jesus Christ,’ In this theology the Incarnation is the symbol of the disappearance of God. God in Jesus Christ no longer exists as ‘transcendent.’ He has emptied himself of his Lordship to identify with man.

Dorothea Sölle (1929-2003) gives the following paraphrase of the Philippians hymn: ‘Christ, who was with God, did not see being with God as his private property.’ ‘Christ’s incomparable status, his “divine nature” means nothing other than the divine life which he lives.’ This life cannot be clutched at and held securely. ‘Christ in his being with God does not let himself be seduced into having-God. Having-God degrades God into a private possession.’[[11]](#footnote-11) God is no longer God, no longer needs to be thought of as God: this is the kenotic novelty of God and it culminates in his disappearance.

But the Orthodox theologian, Sergii Bulgakov (1891-1944), by inscribing kenosis in the act of creating the world, offers a radical alternative to talk of God’s death. Here, God assumes responsibility for the success of Creation from all eternity, and, in anticipation of the possibility of sin, eternally assumes the Cross: ‘The Cross of Christ is inscribed in the world since its creation.’[[12]](#footnote-12) And since the kenotic act is the result of a Trinitarian will, the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully involved in it: the Father as he sends his Son and hands him over to confrontation; the Spirit in that he is the becoming of a world in the process of its perfecting. Given that the world in the process of its becoming, fails to gather the fullness of the Logos and of the grace of the life of the Spirit, the radical impotence of sinful humanity is expressed, which entails the impossibility, as far as human understanding goes, of a kenosis of the Spirit.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**The Kenotic Speech of the Parables**

Christian Scripture is distinguished by a kenotic mode of speech, matching the humility of the one who came down from heaven to share our condition in all its imperfection, yet without sin. From the New Testament beginnings and then at different conciliar moments, from the dogmatic domain to norms of praxis, Christian writing is shaped fundamentally, not accidentally, by concern for the concrete reception of the message, which itself is focused on announcing salvation to humanity. The kenotic writing is homogeneous with the kenotic message, vector and content allied.

The hermeneutics of the New Testament is thus based on a double paradox. On the one hand, the Greek language in which it was entirely written (from the second half of the 1st century to the beginning of the 4th century, the moment of its definitive canonical fixation) differs from that in which its original message was orally proclaimed: Aramaic, the language of Jesus of Nazareth. The diversity of its components (Gospels, Acts, Letters) therefore indirectly refers to this Aramaic source as its first inspiration and its main object. On the other hand, if Greek is not, unlike Hebrew, originally a sacred language, it becomes in some way sacred for Christianity at the very moment the new religion adopts this lingua franca of the Mediterranean basin. To be sure, in the background there is a partial presence of Aramaic and Hebrew lexemes, as well as the Greek corpus of the Jewish Bible, principally the Septuagint. However, Christian scripture does not constitute a mere textual expansion of the Hebrew Scriptures, for it takes the singular form of bearing witness to the crucified and resurrected Messiah who ‘fulfilled’ them. Its speech and language, which draw on Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, ‘kenotically’ honor this witness and the form of its transmission.

There are some fifty occurrences of the word παραϐολή in the NT, including forty-eight in the synoptic gospels; John’s gospel uses παροιμία (similitude) instead. This lexeme is already present in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew ‘mashal (משל).’ If, according to Greek etymology, it designates a ‘throw to the side,’ involving a juxtaposition or comparison, it encompasses as well, as the exegete Joachim Jeremias noted in 1947,[[14]](#footnote-14) genres as diverse as ‘allegory,’ ‘proverb,’ ‘riddle,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘personification,’ ‘witticism,’ and ‘objection.’ Previously the school of Form Criticism (*Formgeschichte*) at the very start of the 20th century had already proceeded to classify parables as ‘metaphor,’ ‘comparison,’ ‘similitude,’ ‘allegory,’ and ‘example.’

However, the meaning and virtue of parables cannot be disengaged from the motifs they explicitly address, sometimes in connection with older biblical themes. For example, Jesus’ response: ‘That’s why I speak to them in parables’ (Mt 13:13), refers to the sharp denunciations of the Prophets in regard to defective Torah observance: ‘He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear’ (Is 42:20). Partly rooted in the Jewish tradition that uses everyday banalities to enunciate a saying of truth, the parabolic procedure of the NT is developed according to different types of literary construction, constantly accentuating the idea of an ‘action.’ It usually aims to question or to alter the behavior of the hearers, under the inspiration of Jesus’ behavior.

It is no less remarkable that the NT parables were constructed from a variety of situations, reflecting typological porosities: situations of teaching, dialogue, and controversy; and that moreover they belong to three contextual spheres that are themselves porous: *literary* (attesting as such to a unity or otherwise); *original* (the occasion, the material data), and *actual* (unfolding of the meaning with a view to possible actualization in a change of epoch). As a result, some parables are charged with a doubling of context and with thematic superpositions. For example, in the parable of the ‘prodigal son,’ the themes of ‘elder son and younger son.’ ‘Jew and Gentile,’ and ‘two brothers’ coincide (echoing the Hebrew theme of two brothers: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, the brothers and Joseph), but with a novel effect, in this case the dialectic between true piety in observing the Law (approved) and external observance.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Several crucial questions have drawn the attention of exegetes, historians, and theologians, particularly since the 1960s, concerning: (1) the relationship between the parable and the degree of historical factuality from which it takes root; (2) the methodological function and tension between different methods of exegesis, notably historical-critical and canonical; (3) the strategic place of the parables in the history of the Church. within the evangelical corpus; (4) their relationship with the expression of an eschatology realized in the person of Christ.

Three parabolic motifs emerge here in combination, manifesting (a) the inaccessibility to humans (due to their sinful condition) of the ultimate divine mysteries, (b) Jesus’ pedagogical kindness aimed at having his interlocutors understand what can be understood, (c) the nature of the divine word parsed in its relation of similitude to the most evident human realities.

As such, the New Testament parables can be deciphered as so many ‘addresses’ inviting the listener or reader to enter actively into their movement, to dwell in them so as to translate their fine points into a change of behavior. They are not, then, to be taken as vague, contingent illustrations of a thesis or a conviction, but are to be placed at the heart of the Christic message and its own mode of communication. Their genre, and in this case their kenotic vection, coincide with their content. Kenosis is always already achieved in the linguistic Covenant: in the dia-logos. The Son of God who emptied himself for our redemption communicates as well in a self-emptying style, pointing not to himself but to simple things and situation, which awaken the alertness of his hearers and give them eyes and ears to understand how God works, discreetly and kenotically, in the everyday world.

**Fabien Muller**

**Review Essay: Recovering Transcendence**

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**Bernhard Nitsche and Marcus Schmücker**, eds. *God or the Divine? Religious Transcendence beyond Monism and Theism, between Personality and Impersonality*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. x + 518 pp.

In the twenty-first century, scholars of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity seem to share a methodological presupposition. The presupposition is that one can only talk about aspirations to ultimate reality—aspirations that play a key role in these traditions—from a certain distance and with caution. These aspirations often go along with problematic claims to absolute truth and to cultural normativity, which put scholars in a difficult position. They find themselves unable to fully endorse or reject these claims and must take on the role of mere observers. They can describe aspirations to ultimate reality but cannot validate or reject them. Talking about ultimate reality could easily be misunderstood, either as discourse complicit in a certain religious project, or critical thereof.

This presupposition is reinforced by another problem. Many religious and philosophical traditions nourish the idea that ordinary reality is ontologically flawed or inferior. Thinkers who theorize about ultimate reality tend to consider concrete, bodily, and historical existence as irrelevant, or even opposed to the quest for the Absolute. One must renounce one’s life, one’s body, one’s past, and aim for disengagement through purificatory asceticism. Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian religious literature is full of calls to monastic withdrawal from society and of invitations to commit oneself only to other-worldly, eternal realities. This commitment has made these traditions suspect both to contemporary philosophers, who, backed by certain scientific and political paradigms, are critical of attempts to speculate about a world beyond our own, and to religious scholars, who tend to prefer sociological, ritualistic, or cultural approaches to religion, which yield more consistent and verifiable results.

As a result, scholars in Indian and Western religions and philosophies tend to take a certain distance from questions that were, in previous centuries, deemed to be the essential questions of religion and philosophy: What is ultimate reality? What is God? Can Christianity, with its strong personalistic claims about God, be true? Or can Buddhism and Brahminism, with their strong apophaticism, be true? Such questions now appear anachronistic. The focus has shifted from the key elements of religion and philosophy to their epiphenomenal elements, that is, to the concrete forms of their cultural and social articulation. The quest for the Absolute and for transcendence—a quest inevitably encumbered by essentialist ideas—yields to the quest for contingent factors and dynamics: What are the social conditions for the arising of a certain religious idea? How do bodily functions and concrete psychological factors influence the perception of religious experience? What kind of cultural and historical context does eschatological speculation—Nirvana, non-dual gnosis, eternal life—reflect, and how has that context brought a certain culture to think about a world beyond the present one?

Today, any attempt to rehabilitate ‘essentialist’ perspectives on ultimate reality, that is, to inquire what kind of proposal can be admitted as consistent, would run the risk of conflicting with this new paradigm. The goal of this volume, *God or the Divine?*, is to confront this risk. The contributors to the volume dare to come back to one of the fundamental questions pervading Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian traditions: How does humanity relate to ultimate reality?

As Bernard Nitsche explains in his introduction, the intention of the volume, which is based on a 2016 conference at the Katholische Akademie Schwerte, is to ‘enter the heart of any religious mindscape, the dimension of the transcendent’ (1). Nitsche is one of the most important scholars of comparative and interreligious theology in Europe. Despite a physical impairment and long-standing health concerns, Nitsche has contributed an unusual number of studies to the field, for example on Raimon Panikkar, revelation, Christology, freedom, and ecumenism. He is thus aware of the problematic implications of transcendence, particularly in the context of Buddhism. From a ‘Western perspective,’ Buddhism seems to respond to the modern quest for religion and philosophy ‘free of dogmas,’ ‘without… metaphysical hypotheses or… transcendence.’ Assuming a common ground for different religious traditions could conceal the irreducible specificities of these religions. To obviate this assumption, Nitsche invites the contributors to reflect, not simply on transcendence, but on the relations between transcendence and different aspects of the human constitution, such as experience and culture.

**Transcendence and Humanity**

The volume is divided into two parts, dedicated to Buddhism and Hinduism respectively. The scholars engage in a comparativist project. Most of them assume a Christian perspective and accept that transcendence is an appropriate category to approach religion as such. Of course, one could object that this assumption vitiates their conclusions. But no interpretation of non-Western traditions through a Western linguistic and methodological framework is immune to this hermeneutic circle. Instead of attempting to thwart circularity, the contributors to this volume present case-studies in which they study and interpret texts and history closely, justifying their standpoint by showing that it corresponds to their source material.

In two subsequent essays, Bernard Nitsche reflects on transcendence as an anthropological and theological category. In ‘Dimensions of Human Existence as Dimension of the Hermeneutics of Transcendence,’ he relates transcendence to the modalities of human existence. He calls this an ‘anthropological approach’ (6). The anthropological approach focuses on the presence of the unconditioned in human life and in its foundational function for ‘personhood’ (7). In the following essay, ‘God or the Divine?,’ he spells out this approach in different theological and philosophical contexts, such as Heidegger’s *Daseinsanalyse* and Paul Tillich’s existentialism. In the section ‘Further Questions’ he presents an overview of the questions that guided the contributors’ writing.

In another preparatory essay, Florian Baab raises the question of how contemporary Christian theologians should deal with the relation between transcendence and humanity, and between God and creation. Other traditions, such as Brahminism and Buddhism, do not presuppose a difference between these two orders of reality, and deal with the concepts of causation and creation differently. Baab argues that Christian theologians should not be tempted by the success of these traditions to overturn the fundamentals of Christianity and to blur the difference between God and creation. Rather, they should aim to confront Christianity’s own paradigm with other religious models ‘in a sensible and reasonable way’ (47), and make sense of differences without seeking to attenuate them.

In a lucid and incisive text, Robert Gimello—one of the most important contemporary scholars of Chinese Buddhism—analyzes Buddhist notions of the ‘unconditioned.’ Gimello’s essay cuts across a set of problems that are often dealt with in a careless or biased manner. Contemporary scholars of Buddhism and philosophers like to posit a dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. Transcendence concerns, they think, an imaginary sphere of supramundane realities, whereas immanence is about the present world and our experience of it. Since Buddhists reject the existence of the soul and of a Brahminic world-spirit, they are obviously immanentists. Gimello’s contribution is a sober objection to this dichotomy. He focuses on the notion of the ‘unconditioned’ (asa*ṃ*sk*ṛ*ta) (56), i.e. that which is not subject to impermanence. Instead of pushing this notion to the side either of transcendence or immanence, he takes his readers on a journey through the complex history of discussions around transcendence and shows that the question might, after all, not allow for a simple, definitive response. A worthwhile notion in Gimello’s essay is that of ‘trans-immanence,’ which points to the ‘entanglement’ of the unconditioned in the world of conditioned reality, and which Gimello discreetly compares, at the end of his paper, to the idea of incarnation (77). His contribution is valuable in that it stresses the importance of resisting the temptation of one-sided answers to complex questions. At a systematic level, such resistance might turn out to be ‘unsatisfactory,’ as Gimello himself admits, but it is the only way for scholars to remain true to the complexity of history.

Next, the late Noel Sheth, SJ, offers some insights into Buddhist concepts corresponding to the Christian idea of grace, viz. to the idea that God is disposed to, or willing to answer human efforts by offering his support. He finds such concepts in the idea of bodhisattvas and buddhas in the appearance of human helpers. While Sheth is inclined to think that Buddhism is open to the idea of grace, he does not think that there is any single Buddhist concept that can be equated with it. This piece is rather casual.

**Dialogue with Buddhism**

Perry Schmidt-Leukel, one of the leading figures in contemporary Buddhist-Christian studies, reflects on *nirv*ā*ṇa* as a possible candidate for transcendent and unconditioned reality in Buddhism. Schmidt-Leukel begins by taking up the example of a contemporary account of the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, which he finds in a popular introduction to Buddhism by Charles Prebish and Damien Keown. Prebish and Keown explain that Buddhism excludes that there are ‘entities or metaphysical realities—such as God or a soul… that transcend the causal nexus’ (87), as if this exclusion were self-evident and universally admitted. He sees this figment of self-evidence as symptomatic of a general trend in Buddhist philosophy. He then sets out to criticize that trend by revisiting various sources, such as the *Milindapañha* and Nāgārjuna. He finds that these texts do not, as some scholars would like, reduce transcendence to immanence, but on the contrary, elevate the world to *nirv*ā*ṇa.* Schmidt-Leukel concludes by a helpful categorization of the approaches to the unconditioned in different religions, in which he emphasizes that ‘the ineffability or transcategoriality of ultimate reality is affirmed in all major religions’ (98). This contribution is extremely valuable, and one could wish for it to become a reference for scholars of Mahāyāna philosophy.

Hermann-Josef Röllicke takes an unusual path and argues that the Buddhist rejection of what he calls ‘is-ness’ and ‘is-not-ness’ is not comparable to the Western notion of transcendence because the Western notion has strong cultural and religious implications. Through a comparative study of Nicholas of Cusa and a Buddhist sutra, he finds that Buddhist emptiness takes negation further than the Platonic and Christian tradition. While Röllicke certainly has a solid knowledge of both the Western and the Buddhist tradition, I am not sure that the evidence he presents to the reader convincingly supports his claim.

Anne MacDonald is well-known to Buddhologists for her annotated edition of Candrakīrti’s infamously difficult *Prasannapad*ā, which has become an indispensable tool for scholars of Madhyamaka philosophy. In her contribution to this volume, she analyzes Madhyamaka ideas on *nirv*ā*ṇa* as transcendence. She finds that these ideas are original in that they present *nirv*ā*ṇa* as something that is always given, or ‘guaranteed’ (131), as she writes. *Nirv*ā*ṇa* is neither a reified Absolute, as earlier scholars wanted it to be, nor an abstract truth that one can simply decipher and attain intellectually, as some Western Buddhist like to think.

Michael von Brück presents an inquiry into different variations of the idea of ‘unity.’ He analyzes how unity is implied by the *skandha-*s, time, ‘formless form’ (dependent arising as emptiness), and the ‘diversity’ of finite things. He understands the unity of these elements as ‘dynamic,’ as opposed to the static unity found in philosophies that postulate, underneath the surface of reality, an unchangeable substrate.

Starting with the Śā*listambhas*ū*tra* and Nāgārjuna, Klaus-Dieter Mathes, professor at Hong Kong University’s famous Center of Buddhist Studies and a leading scholar of Indian Buddhism, takes the reader through the history of the idea of dependent arising. He makes a solid case for the theory that ‘dependent arising’ implicitly conveys the idea of ‘all-unity’ and that it is not just a category or intellectual notion for something that has no ontological coherence. This excludes the earliest state of Buddhist doctrinal development, at which ‘dependent arising’ simply ‘explains the causal nexus underlying rebirth,’ and not some cosmic unity. Mathes’s contribution is a valuable and pleasantly written piece of historical scholarship.

Dennis Hirota offers insights into ‘the awareness of transcendence’ that he finds in the teachings of Shinran, a Japanese Pure Land Buddhist teacher. He skillfully navigates the tension between two contrasting perspectives: that of the ideal of wisdom on the one hand, and that of the ‘acute self-awareness of inexorable ignorance’ (184) on the other. He then surveys the different expressions of transcendence produced by that tension, for example those manifesting the ‘formless,’ in practice, and in the recitation of the *nembutsu*, a meditative exercise implying the name of Amitābha. One can only admire the clarity and elegance of Hirota’s writing.

Henri de Lubac’s writings on Buddhism are, James L. Fredricks rightly observes, ‘largely overlooked’ (200). Fredericks, who knows de Lubac through and through, sets out to examine a question that Lubac himself has thought about: the difference between Christian personhood and Buddhist no-self. His conclusion is particularly interesting. Rather than compromising Christian dogma or misrepresenting Buddhism—two equally problematic approaches that comparativists often fall into—he agrees to come to a negative conclusion, rehabilitating de Lubac’s intuition that Christian soteriology is about ‘a restoration of our original personhood,’ and Pure Land Buddhism is not.

The idea that God is a person might be evident and acceptable to Christians but not to other religions. To find an answer to this problem, Joseph O’Leary, one of the most prolific and distinguished theorists of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, proposes to draw on the Buddhist fourfold negation. O’Leary argues that this negation allows us to see in ‘personal God-language a skillful means’ (234), and to avoid both metaphysical essentialism and relativism. O’Leary’s writing is—as always—profound and rich. I disagree with him on many points: I don’t think that religious dynamics follow the logic of ‘sublation’ (218) or that interreligious dialogue brings religions to reflect on their inherent limitations. The twenty-first century is a century of religious violence and extremism, and history seems to move away from the horizon of dialogue. Outside of intellectual circles, essentialism reemerges. Furthermore, it might be true that ‘in the study of religion the phenomenological has taken the upper hand’ (223). But the study of religion is not religion—and in religion, essentialist metaphysics are reclaiming territory, for example in regard to gender, sexuality, or human life. It seems that these things outrange the phenomenological turn that O’Leary advocates for; but that a text leads its readers to such reflections testifies to its originality and strength.

**Dialogue with Hinduism**

Brad Bannon reverts to Nitsche’s introductory essay and presents some thoughts on the importance of intersubjectivity and personal experience for the search of transcendence. He applies this anthropological approach to Śaṅkara’s Īśvara, that is, to the idea of a personal manifestation of transcendence. He thinks that the famous upanishadic saying ‘thou art that’ gives as much importance to ‘thou’ as to ‘that.’ Applying this insight to pedagogy, he estimates that teaching should emphasize the personal character of each student’s way from his or her ‘thou’ to *brahman*.

In comparative and religious scholarship, Śaṅkara’s *advaita* tends to be brought down to the level of personal experience and belief. Godabarisha Mishra presents a philosophical analysis of the tenets of *advaita* to reemphasize its rationality and systematic character. Mishra’s paper reads as a call to order, bringing Śaṅkara back from religious or ecumenical appropriations into philosophy, and clearing up various philosophical misunderstandings on the way.

Francis X. Clooney provides a critical response to Nitsche’s initial question. Clooney, who is not only one of the finest specialists of Mīmāmā and Vedānta in the West but recognized as one of the founding figures of Hindu-Christian dialogue and comparative theology, presents a fine, balanced, and cautious analysis of the framework in which Indian traditions can be discussed in the West. Instead of situating human and divine notions in a model that corresponds to Nitsche’s questions, Clooney carefully underlines the complexity of Indian traditions, thus making it evident that they might be too complex to provide answers to the simple questions that the West raises. He concludes that in ‘Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta… both the divine and the human are problematized, and without a straightforward retrieval of their value on a transcendent level’ (298). Clooney’s writing has the quality—which much comparative theology falls short of—of observing the incommensurable complexity of Indian thought. He does not reduce sources and traditions to predetermined categories. His contribution is an excellent demonstration of how comparative theology should, in the best case, proceed.

Gérard Colas goes on to discuss whether Indian philosophy allows for the concept of personhood or not. He passes through various stages of development and traditions to find that there is a certain contrast between the philosophical, impersonal ideas of Vedānta and the devotional practice of Hinduism as religion. He sees these two elements as the ‘two functions of the divine’ (314), an approach that seems applicable not only to Hinduism, but also to other religious traditions.

Brahman is described, in Brahminic philosophy, both as having qualities and as empty of qualities—as *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa brahman*. Anantanand Rambachan interprets the tension between these characteristics as mirroring the states of *brahman* before and after creation. Our involvement in creation and our way of conceptualizing it makes both perspectives necessary, and none of them can be rejected or be considered as an absolute.

John Nemec presents a study on Somānanda’s treatise Ś*ivadṛṣṭi*. This is a precious paper. Somānanda is the earliest exponent of the ŚaiviteKashmiri school of monistic idealism known as Pratyabhijñā. Nemec is one of the leading specialists and knows his texts admirably well. He investigates the Ś*ivadṛṣṭi* through the lens of Nitsche’s anthropological approach and concludes that in contrast to other schools of Hindu thought, Somānanda does not repudiate personalism, despite his insistence on identity: ‘Śiva does not transcend the world, on this view; instead, he is the personalism that defines it’ (343).

Noel Sheth, who also appears in the first part of this volume, discusses Nimbārka’s philosophy of ‘difference and non-difference.’ This contribution spans just a few pages and resembles an explanation more than a substantial contribution. Sheth passed away in 2017 and may not have had the time to expand this text. One should appreciate the editor’s choice to honor his memory by including these pages in the volume.

Remaining within the Hindu Middle Ages, Robert Zydenbos takes the reader on a journey through the system of Madhva, the Vedānta dualist. Zydenbos seeks to strike a balance between the ‘religious’ (351) and the philosophical elements of Madhva’s system. He follows Madhva up to the supreme source of truth and suggests that this source is strongly impacted by faith—not only, as Zydenbos interestingly notes, by religious faith ‘but also faith in himself’ (361). Zydenbos’s sober conclusion is valuable insofar as philosophers and theologians tend to represent systems as self-grounded entities. Zydenbos portrays Madhva in more life-like colors.

In a somewhat unsettling contrast to the other contributions, Fabian Völker embarks on a speculative adventure. While the other contributors use Nitsche’s questions as a starting point to explore the ideas of specific authors, Völker proceeds in the opposite direction, beginning with a philosophical question, and seeking answers from a variety of advaitic thinkers and German nineteenth-century philosopher F. W. J. Schelling. The question that he investigates is that of the relation between the absolute and the finite world. After a daedalian journey through advaitic literature and Schelling’s texts, he deems both the advaitic struggle to find a middle way between illusionism and causation and Schelling’s attempt to bring back finitude into the absolute to be aporetic and problematic. Ultimately, he suspects that Fichte’s apophatic answer might be the only viable one. Völker’s contribution is a speculative yet logically rigorous *tour de force*, an expression of conceptual curiosity supported by remarkable erudition. However, I suspect that most readers will give up midway through this piece, simply because one must be unusually patient to follow Völker’s tracks through a jungle of references and conceptual bifurcations. Comparative philosophers tend to think that readers can easily follow their reasoning and that they will be as enthusiastic as themselves about their discoveries. While I find great joy in Völker’s speculative aerobatics, I fear that some readers might find this contribution too demanding. Those who are sufficiently patient (and informed) will find it delightful.

In diametrical opposition to Völker’s Fichtean manifesto, Steven P. Hopkins writes about Veṅkaṭanātha’s poetry as theology. Beginning with the philosopher Rāmānuja’s influence on Veṅkaṭanātha, Hopkins takes the reader through different topics in Veṅkaṭanātha’s poetry, such as love and pain, and reflects on the ways that Veṅkaṭanātha’s writing makes these human topics resonate with theological content. Hopkins sees Veṅkaṭanātha’s merit in the materialization of the abstract ideas of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta philosophy: his poetry has managed to reveal the divine in nature, in humanity, and in the life of the spirit (407).

Timothy Cahill explores the Indian notion of *rasa*, i.e., the ‘aesthetic savoring’ (as he calls it, 426) of different experiences, as a possible mediator of transcendence. He sees in Abhinavagupta’s theory of *rasa* an important contribution to theology, and in particular, to religious devotion as *bhakti*. Cahill’s analysis corresponds precisely to Nitsche’s ambition of ‘adopting fundamental human structures to explore transcendence’ (427), as he thinks that *rasa* is not just a theory of human sensitivity, but a fundamental mode of religious experience.

Christine Büchner sees in contemporary Western religion a lack of what she calls ‘resonance.’ Traditional theological concepts have lost their appeal and fail to speak to people. Büchner undertakes to study how God’s ‘action in the world and through humans’ may serve as a corrective against that lack of resonance. She makes Thomas Aquinas dialogue with Rāmānuja and finds in their theologies a way to reconcile transcendence and immanence. This reconciliation may help us, she thinks, ‘refresh our traditional theology’ (445).

Michelle Voss Roberts investigates Śaivite non-dualism as an example of a theology that promotes the idea that ‘divine consciousness is already reflected in the ordinary’ (465), and not just in absolute transcendence. She begins her contribution with an anecdote on babies’ ‘perception and the limited awareness that they have of the difference between themselves and the surrounding world. She then outlines the aim of Śaivite theology ‘to facilitate the achievement of liberation while living’ (458). This theology has a positive vision, Roberts argues, of limitations: ‘Without limitations in power, knowledge, satisfaction, place, and time, there would be no object for divine consciousness’ (462). While I cannot judge whether this characterization is faithful to Śaivite teachings, some of the parallelisms that Roberts draws, such as that between the religious idea of transcending the body on the one hand, and sterilization and euthanasia on the other (462-3), seem extreme to me—not to speak of the way that she links, among others, vaccines and surgeries to the reinforcement of ‘norms of being human that do not honor embodied difference’ (465). It seems to me that asceticism and practices that aim to detach the mind from the body do the contrary of establishing norms of humanity.

Finally, Marcus Schmücker investigates Rāmānuja’s, Sudarśanasūri’s, and Veṅkaṭanātha’s ideas on theological reciprocity and gift-giving in the context of human freedom. He finds, in these thinkers, a balanced explanation of freedom as something that God grants to the human being through a paradoxical gift, since God is the cause of all things, while freedom is the ability to act as such a cause. Schmücker knows his texts well, and his contribution brings this volume to an end in an elegant way.

**A Refreshing Challenge**

This volume is a helpful tool that could contribute to making comparative theology more relevant to other academic disciplines, such as Hindu and Buddhist Studies. The endeavor of the contributors to take a certain distance from contemporary trends in scholarship on philosophy of religion, Buddhism, and Hinduism, is refreshing. Some of the contributors throw a gauntlet to the apologists of Western inculturation and secular appropriations of Buddhism and Hinduism. They show that transcendence has different meanings and different implications, but that no Buddhist or Hindu sources allow us to simply dismiss transcendence or to see it as an inadequate hermeneutical category. Transcendence is a concern inherent to human existence.

The volume presents minor flaws. Firstly, while some authors, such as Mathes, chose to let native speakers reread their contributions, others did not do so. The book contains only few typing errors, but the style of some contributions is strongly Germanic, in a way that could alienate certain English readers. A native speaker could have made this issue less salient.

The contributions are of unequal quality. Some texts are brilliantly written and will have a lasting impact on comparative studies, for example (without excluding others) Schmidt-Leukel, Gimello, Clooney, Mathes, O’Leary, Hirota. Others lack a certain depth and cannot compare to the more substantial contributions. But this is the fate of edited volumes, especially when they bring together texts that were originally conference papers.

Thirdly, one can see, in some contributions, a certain uneasiness with Nitsche’s anthropological approach. Clooney, for example, thinks that the complexity and vastness of Indian thought is of such nature that it cannot but withstand categories such as personality, impersonality, the human, and the divine. Other contributors, like Gimello, try to expand Nitsche’s perspective by contextualizing and problematizing it. This makes the reader think that the contributors would have preferred a different set of questions—not because Nitsche’s questions are too restrictive, but simply because they do not necessarily map onto the fields in which the contributors usually work. Some contributors chose to focus on the dichotomy of transcendence and immanence, and it seems to me that this dichotomy could have provided a less problematic starting point than anthropological or existential categories. But this is a matter of taste and personal interest, that doesn’t make Nitsche’s own approach less interesting.

This volume will, due to its title, the specializations of its contributors, and other factors, only reach a small community of scholars. But I dare to hope that it will act as an incentive to renew the inquiry into ‘God’ and the ‘Divine’ as two fundamental expressions of transcendence in religion.

**Perry Schmidt-Leukel**

**Pope Francis and the Question of Religious Diversity**

Perry Schmidt-Leukel is Senior Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster, Germany. His research focuses on religious pluralism, inter-faith relations, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and interreligious theology. His publications include *Buddha Mind – Christ Mind: A Christian Commentary on the* Bodhicaryāvatāra (2019); *To See a World in a Flower: Buddhism and Christianity: A Fractal Interpretation of Their Relation* (2020), and *The Celestial Web. Buddhism and Christianity: A Different Comparison* (2024). His 2015 Gifford Lectures have been published as *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (2017).

A theological understanding of religious diversity seems to be one of the matters close to Pope Francis’ heart. Already in their 2018 book about *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue* Harold Kasimow and Alan Race (2018) presented a compilation of the Pope’s respective statements that comprises 75 pages. Since then, many more—and even more illuminating statements—can be added. Among the most recent examples are Francis’ striking remarks in addressing an inter-faith youth meeting in Singapore on 13 September 2024. He not only endorsed the courage for inter-faith dialogue, but also rejected ideas such as ‘My religion is more important than yours…,’ or ‘Mine is the true one, yours is not true….,’ because these would lead to ‘destruction.’[[16]](#footnote-16) And then he added:

All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy, they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God’s children. ‘But my God is more important than yours!’ Is this true? There is only one God, and religions are like languages, paths to reach God. Some Sikh, some Muslim, some Hindu, some Christian. Understood?[[17]](#footnote-17)

In using the metaphor of different languages while explicitly rejecting positions such as ‘my religion is more important than yours,’ Francis combines diversity with equal value. Different languages are not the same but different. But they are of the same value.

As Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, a retired Professor of Old Testament Studies, rightly comments, the comparison of different religions to different languages expressing human experiences of the Divine is ‘a classical topos of the pluralist theology of religions.… Until recently, the license to teach theology was denied or revoked for Catholic theologians who endorsed that thesis.’[[18]](#footnote-18) But then he hastens to defend the Pope, rather paternalistically, by arguing that his words must not be taken too literally, for the Pope would not come from the same highly qualified academic theological background as his two predecessors. This remark is revealing in various ways. First, it suggests that Schwienhorst-Schönberger is not familiar with the fact that pluralist positions are endorsed by many people with an excellent academic training, both theologically and philosophically. Second, he ignores the fact that Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI took rather different stances on interreligious encounter, most evident in Ratzinger’s initial qualms about the first multireligious prayer meeting of Assisi, initiated by John Paul II.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Other critics take a less lenient stance than Professor Schwienhorst-Schönberger. Charles J. Chaput, for example, archbishop emeritus of Philadelphia, implicitly even questions whether the pope is still a Christian when he emphasizes:

Christians hold that Jesus alone is the path to God. To suggest, imply, or allow others to infer otherwise is a failure to love because genuine love always wills the good of the other, and the good of all people is to know and love Jesus Christ, and through him the Father who created us.[[20]](#footnote-20)

And Bishop Joseph Strickland tweeted: ‘The only way to God the Father is through His Son Jesus Christ. To deny this is to deny the Catholic faith, this is called heresy.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Divinely Willed Diversity**

Let me revisit some other of Pope Francis’ remarks after what Kasimow and Race already covered in their collection. In a brief address accompanying his 2018 Christmas blessing *Urbi et Orbi*, Francis said that the differences between human beings ‘are not a detriment or a danger; they are a source of richness.’ In this, Francis was not merely referring to the ‘great variety of races, languages, and cultures,’ but also—as he called it—to ‘fraternity among persons of different religions.’ In praising the richness of human diversity, he employed an aesthetic metaphor: ‘As when an artist is about to make a mosaic: it is better to have tiles of many colours available, rather than just a few!’[[22]](#footnote-22) While—as far as I can see—Francis’ use of this particular metaphor was new, the message itself was in line with many of the statements collected by Kasimow and Race.

A particularly striking example is the address given by Pope Francis at the Interreligious General Audience on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra aetate*, on 28 October 2015. He concluded this address with the words:

May our prayer—each one according to his or her own tradition—adhere fully to the will of God, who wants all men and women to recognize they are brothers and sisters and live as such, forming the great human family in the harmony of diversity. (Kasimow/Race, 57)

Quite obviously this ‘harmony of diversity’ includes the diversity of religious traditions and by implication the Pope suggests that this diversity of religions, with their different traditions of relating human beings to God in prayer, is willed by God. This implication was made explicit in the document *Human Fraternity*, jointly signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyab, on 4 February 2019, when it stated: ‘The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

According to Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the former head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, this statement has to be understood in terms of ‘God’s permissive will’ (‘der zulassende Wille Gottes’), the kind of divine will that also allows the existence of evil for the sake of human freedom. According to Müller, ‘willed by God’ cannot mean that there are other ways to God apart from Christ, but that the diversity of religions is allowed in order to serve as a preparation for unity with God in Christ and the acceptance of God in freedom (Müller, 301).

Is Müller’s ‘Catholic reading aid,’ as he calls it, convincing? If religious diversity was divinely willed only in the sense of the permission of something less good or even evil, will this also apply to the other forms of human diversity mentioned in the same sentence in one breath, i.e., the ‘diversity of… color, sex, race and language’? This hardly makes any sense at all. Moreover, seeing the diversity of religions as merely permitted by God clearly contradicts the Pope’s earlier comparison of this diversity to the diversity of colors used by the artist to create a more beautiful mosaic. This image speaks the language of a positively willed diversity, not that of merely permissive will. Müller is obviously reading the Pope against the grain of the Pope’s intentions.

If religious diversity is positively ‘willed by God’ as an enrichment of human life on earth, one should make the best use of it. According to Francis, this implies that we need each other and depend on one another precisely because of our diversity. This includes to the whole breadth of humanity and centrally involves religion, as can be seen in Pope Francis’ address during the VII. Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions on 14 September 2022 in Kazakhstan, where he said:

Before the mystery of the infinite that transcends and attracts us, the religions remind us that we are creatures; we are not omnipotent, but men and women journeying towards the same heavenly goal. Our shared nature as creatures thus gives rise to a common bond, an authentic fraternity. It makes us realize that the meaning of life cannot be reduced to our own individual interests, but is deeply linked to the fraternity that is part of our identity. We mature only with others and thanks to others.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Another implication of a divinely willed religious diversity is that we must not try to remove it. Pope Francis made this rather clear when, in 2015, he addressed an interreligious meeting at the Ground Zero Memorial in New York:

In opposing every attempt to create a rigid uniformity, we can and must build unity on the basis of our diversity of languages, cultures and religions, and lift our voices against everything which would stand in the way of such unity. Together we are called to say ‘no’ to every attempt to impose uniformity and ‘yes’ to a diversity accepted and reconciled. (Kasimow/Race, 54)

However, is it not the explicit or implicit wish of every exclusivist and inclusivist theology of religions that ideally everybody shall become a member of one’s own religious community? Yet this implies that religious diversity is not ideal, but something to be overcome. Is Francis’ appreciation of religious diversity as a core religious value thus evidence of pluralist inclinations? Is he a religious pluralist or, perhaps, an anonymous religious pluralist?

**The Hold of Inclusivism**

As a number of contributors to the Kasimow/Race volume show, Francis’ pluralistic-sounding statements stand next to a line of other utterances in which he endorses the particular type of inclusivism that the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church adopted during the Second Vatican Council and that it further developed—with some movements forth (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991) and back (*Dominus Iesus*, 2000)—in its post-conciliar teachings. Officially and doctrinally, Pope Francis is not a religious pluralist, although his inclusivism is closer to the *Dialogue and Proclamation* end than to the opposite end of *Dominus Iesus*. Yet, one must not forget that Jacques Dupuis, SJ, who had drafted the dialogue part of *Dialogue and Proclamation*, was censored by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith because of his allegedly pluralist, but actually broadly inclusivist inclinations (see Burrows 2013). Like Francis, Dupuis held that religious diversity is divinely willed, that it should not be regarded as merely a matter of fact (*de facto*) but as ordained by God (*de iure*).[[25]](#footnote-25) It seems that Pope Francis holds the same or at least a very similar position as his fellow Jesuit. However, so far Dupuis has not been rehabilitated, let alone all the other Catholic theologians who were sanctioned and convicted (even posthumously as in the case of Anthony de Mello) by Francis’ predecessor because of their pluralist positions. Hence it is not surprising that Pope Francis himself has been cursed as a heretic by some Catholics.[[26]](#footnote-26)

So, is the Pope’s doctrinal stance—even if it is as broadminded as that of Dupuis—in conflict with the Pope’s persistent call to inter-faith dialogue and appreciation of religious diversity? Is there a mismatch or tension between the Pope’s ethics of dialogue and his official inclusivist theology of religions? Does dialogue require that partners in dialogue are on a par, so that dialogue is at variance with claims to Christian superiority or with analogous claims to the superiority of any other religion, as Leonard Swidler (44) put it in the seventh rule of his famous ‘dialogue decalogue’? To my mind, the parity of dialogue partners may only mean that they are on a par in terms of having equal rights and opportunities to express their views and beliefs, and of having their views being seriously considered by the dialogue partner. It cannot mean that dialogue is only possible if partners in dialogue consider their reciprocal views as equally true and valid in advance of the dialogue itself. A pluralist theology of religions holds that several religions are equally true regarding their revelatory and soteriological nature. This view may indeed be the outcome, the result, of serious interreligious dialogue—as has often been the case. But it must not be taken as the precondition of dialogue. Otherwise, any dialogue between religious believers and atheist believers would be impossible; or any dialogue between, say, a Christian pluralist and a Christian exclusivist or inclusivist: they do not and cannot regard their views about religious diversity as equally true and valid.[[27]](#footnote-27) Therefore, I do not see an immediate tension between the Pope’s ethics of dialogue and the Pope’s inclusivist theology of religions.

However, things are more complicated than that. The understanding, goals and practice of dialogue will be different under pluralist premises: On pluralist premises, dialogue explores and enacts reciprocal dependency and complementarity. This is clear, for example, in what Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu scholar involved in dialogue with Christians for decades, has to say about religious ‘self-sufficiency’ as a stance where religions do not see any need for each other, in contrast to an attitude of humility and openness regarding ‘the possibility of learning from and being enriched by the ways people of other traditions know and describe the infinite one’ (208).[[28]](#footnote-28) The history of religions is full of interreligious controversies, of apologetic, polemical and frequently just insulting samples of talking to or better quarrelling with each other. In contrast, open dialogue does not seek to defeat or ridicule the other, but to gain new insights by better understanding the other’s perspective and—as much as possible—by jointly inquiring into truth. Assuming, in an inclusivist manner, the superiority of one’s own religious tradition, one may still expect to learn something from the elements of truth in other faith-traditions. Yet this expectation—or hope—is surely much broader and more pronounced if one reckons seriously with the possibility that the quality of theological or spiritual wisdom preserved in the other tradition is not by definition and inevitably inferior to that of one’s own tradition, since the revelation or insight provided by the key mediators of one’s own tradition is superior in an unparalleled way. A dialogue of gaining new theological insights by jointly exploring the divinely rooted sources of our different traditions and transforming them into re-sources of crafting new theological answers to the new questions pressed on us by the contemporary world, is presumably more at home in a pluralist than in any inclusivist theology of religions.[[29]](#footnote-29) Is this the kind of dialogue that Pope Francis has in mind, when he says that ‘we mature only with others and thanks to others’?

**Pluralism at the Grassroots**

There are indeed aspects in Francis’ personal approach, with its individual distinctiveness, that do not fit in easily with his dogmatic suit. In a careful analysis Stephen Roberts shows that Francis’ personal theology is strongly influenced by a particular sensitivity to the religiosity and spirituality of the ordinary people. This, as Roberts suggests, is likely due to the influence of Latin American liberation theology on Pope Francis. In the spirituality of the ordinary people, in that what is today often called ‘lived religion,’[[30]](#footnote-30) we find a good deal of religious hybridity and syncretism—also in the Catholic population of South and Middle America. In the Pope’s official statements, the rejection of ‘facile syncretism’ is a formula that pops up repeatedly. How does this match with his particular openness and even trust in the faith of ordinary people? Perhaps the answer lies in the word ‘facile,’ which might suggest a leveling of religious diversity instead of its appreciation.

According to Roberts (141), ‘Pope Francis’s openness to the theological significance of grassroots, ordinary, popular Catholicism has the potential to lead in a very different direction from the rooted openness of the mainstream approach of the post-Vatican II magisterium that in most respects he embodies.’ I suppose Roberts is right in this observation and I would like to support his view by pointing out an example that Roberts himself does not use. During Pope Francis’ visit to Sri Lanka in 2014, he also visited a Buddhist temple. When asked on the plane about this particular visit, he explained:

Yesterday at Madhu I saw something which I would never have expected: not everyone there was Catholic, not even the majority! There were Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and each one came to pray; they go and they say they receive graces there. There is in the people—and the people are never wrong—the sense that there is something there that unites them. And if they are so naturally united in going together to pray at that shrine—which is Christian but not only Christian, because all want [to go there], then why shouldn’t I go to a Buddhist temple to greet them? What happened yesterday at Madhu is very important. It helps us to understand the meaning of the interreligious experience in Sri Lanka: there is respect for one another. (Kasimow/Race, 30)

In other words, Pope Francis explained his visit to a Buddhist temple at least in part as a reaction to what he had observed and learned from a kind of multi-religious practice among ordinary people in Sri Lanka: ‘There is in the people—and the people are never wrong—they sense that there is something there that unites them.’ This informal remark bespeaks a kind of religious intuition that clearly goes beyond many of his doctrinal statements but has emerged more strongly in the most recent years, that is, in his religious appreciation of religious diversity as a divinely willed opportunity and necessity for mutual growth and enrichment.

As mentioned above, the belief that religious diversity is divinely willed—not as a temptation to the true believers, nor as a *preparatio* for the Church, but as a source of mutual enrichment like the wealth of colors that makes the mosaic of life more beautiful—excludes any attempt to overcome this diversity and replace all other religions by Christianity, because this would go against the presupposed divine intention. This is how Francis’ statement at Ground Zero most likely needs to be understood: ‘Together we are called to say “no” to every attempt to impose uniformity and “yes” to a diversity accepted and reconciled.’ Francis rejects in quite explicit words any proselytizing approach to other religions, stating that ‘Proselytism is solemn nonsense, it makes no sense’ (Kasimow/Race, 283). But this stance is not that easy to reconcile with the official Roman-Catholic inclusivism. Pope Francis affirms that God is at work in other religions and ‘tends to produce signs and rites, sacred expressions which in turn bring others to a communitarian experience of journeying towards God.’ But he continues to emphasize that these other religions nevertheless ‘lack the meaning and efficacy of the sacraments instituted by Christ’ (Kasimow/Race, 10-11). However, if the Roman Catholic Church is objectively and significantly superior to all other religious communities in its sacramental efficacy to keep human beings in a salvific relation to God, should Pope Francis then not honestly and fervently wish that all human beings become members of the Church?[[31]](#footnote-31) This, however, would exactly imply to say ‘no’ to religious diversity and ‘yes’ to the attempt of replacing it by religious uniformity.

In his conclusion to the Kasimow/Race volume Leo Lefebure summarizes that ‘many interreligious partners find a tension between mission and dialogue in Pope Francis’s outreach, and pluralists in various traditions have challenged his perspective for retaining a claim of superiority for the Christian tradition over others’ (311). Yet is this the fault of the pluralists or is there indeed an inconsistency in the utterances of the Pope? Is it too much to call Francis an ‘anonymous pluralist’? Officially, he is a Catholic inclusivist. But his spiritual heart seems to be wider than what the boundaries of the current magisterium permit.

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**Edmond Zi-Kang Chua**

**Pope Francis on the Religions as a Path to God**

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*Tutte le religioni sono un cammino per arrivare a Dio.*

‘All the religions are a path to reach God.’

Pope Francis

On 13 September 2024, Pope Francis dispensed with his script during an interreligious dialogue with young people in Singapore involving over 600 participants from more than 50 schools and religious and interfaith organizations, and made some comments that elicited strong reactions from Catholics and non-Catholics alike worldwide who felt that the pontiff had controverted official Roman Catholic teaching concerning Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Speaking in Italian, the pontiff had expressed his personal appreciation for the willingness of the young people he was addressing to engage in interfaith dialogue before a short exchange in which he urged against an attitude of religious superiority not only on practical but also theological grounds.

The Pope’s remarks, as rendered live by his translator, Msgr Christopher Washington, the Vatican’s secretariat of state’s English section,[[33]](#footnote-33) were as follows:

One of the things that struck me about all of you here is your ability to engage in interreligious dialogue, and this is very important.

Because if we start to fight amongst ourselves and saying, ‘My religion is more important than yours. My religion is true and yours is not.’ Where will that lead us?

Where will it lead us? Someone respond. Where will it lead us?

[A young individual offers: ‘Destruction’]

Yes, it’s okay to discuss and to… because every religion is a way to arrive at God.

Sort of a comparison and an example would be, they are sort of like different languages in order to arrive at God.

But God is God for all. And since God is God for all, then we are all sons and daughters of God.

‘But my God is more important than your God!’ Is that true?

There is only one God and each of us is a language so to speak in order to arrive at God.

Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, there are different paths. Understood?[[34]](#footnote-34)

In order to have interreligious dialogue among young people, it takes courage. Because youth is really the time of courage in our lives.[[35]](#footnote-35)

By and large, the Pope made two contentious statements which we will directly translate:[[36]](#footnote-36)

The first: ‘*Tutte le religioni sono un cammino per arrivare a Dio…. Sono come diversi lingue, diversi idiomi, per arrivare lì. Ma Dio è Dio per tutti. E come Dio è Dio per tutti, noi siamo tutti figli di Dio.*’ This may be translated, ‘All the religions are a path to reach God…. They are like different tongues [*lingue*], different languages [*idiomi*], to reach there. But God is God for everyone. And since God is God for everyone, we are all children of God.’

The second: ‘*C’è un solo Dio, e noi, sono idiomi cammino lingue per arrivare a Dio. Qualcuno sikh, qualcuno musulmano, qualcuno indù, qualcuno cristiano, ma sono diversi cammini*.’ I render this as follows: ‘There is only one God [the Pope was pointing at the ceiling], and we, they are different languages [*idiomi*], a path, languages [*lingue*], to reach God. Some Sikh, some Muslim, some Hindu, some Christian, but they are different paths.’

There is no doubt that Pope Francis was hereby expressing that all religious traditions, including Christianity, are equal in spiritual value in leading to the same divine reality. We arrive at this conclusion from the fact that the Pope had implied that it is untrue for a person of any religious tradition to insist that their God is ‘more important than’ another person’s God. One of the specific implications of such a remark is that the Christian conception of God is in no way superior to the conception of God or deity in another religious tradition, but is rather of equal value to the latter.

In the Pope’s follow-up, we can see that he does not espouse a form of theology which makes of equal status the Gods of various religious traditions; instead, the pontiff is committed to the traditional Christian belief in the existence of just one God. The Pope’s monotheistic affirmation implies that it is the same one true God who reveals Godself in the different religious traditions, and the divine revelation conferred on each religious group is not only authentic but of equal merit, so much so that the validity of each religious path to God may be justifiably compared with that of any of the many and diverse human languages in existence.

Pope Francis alternates between the use of two different Italian words for language, namely, *lingua* and *idioma*, using them in the plural, in drawing an analogy to explain the distinction and similarity between Christianity and other religions. In Italian, *lingua* is employed in social settings and *idioma* in formal or academic writing to mean language, suggesting the Pope’s desire to reach both popular and academic audiences with his message of religious inclusivity.

**The Pope’s View in the Perspective of a Theology of Religions**

To have recourse to a well-known typology in a theology of religions, Pope Francis is not an exclusivist (the view that there is nothing in non-Christian religions to lead a person to God in any sense), because he does see value in non-Christian religions.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Inclusivism (the view that non-Christian religions are at best purveyors of certain spiritual or moral values not amounting to salvation though quite possibly preparing a person for salvation) does not fit his theological perspective either, because he seems to recognize the validity of non-Christian religions as equal to that of Christianity.

Pluralism (the view that all religions are useful sources of spiritual and moral direction, though it may not be possible to know God or the divine in an objective way) might not be an appropriate category to classify the Pope’s theological perspective either, seeing as he continues to speak about the possibility of attaining a real encounter with God.[[38]](#footnote-38)

I propose that the Pope’s view on the spiritual value of non-Christian religions may well be closer to what I would call a Pluriform system.

Due to limitations of space, I cannot do more than furnish an outline of such a theological system in relation to the question of the value of non-Christian religious traditions vis-à-vis their capacity to positively facilitate an encounter with God.

In Pluriformity, the words of the Bible (in its minimal 66-book protocanonical form) are taken in the sense of a correspondence view of truth; that is, as directly indicating things which exist in reality rather than being allegorical or metaphorical in nature, as far as the genre of a biblical passage allows for this possibility. As such, a Pluriform system permits some form of objective knowledge of God as well as a direct encounter with the divine presence.

A Pluriform approach does not see any contradiction between affirming both that Christ is the only Lord and Savior and that non-Christian religious traditions provide an equally valid and efficacious way of bringing a person into an encounter with God. Its affirmation of the equal spiritual value of all religious traditions as well as humanism does not translate into the suggestion that all religious traditions teach the same things about God, nor does it paper over differences and even contradictions between the views of different religious traditions.

It does, however, commend an essentially harmonizable set of religious visions of being human in terms of holding a responsible, caring, and compassionate attitude toward God (or the gods, divinity, or the ultimately significant), oneself, and others, and engaging in actions reflecting that attitude. Insofar as these shared visions of humanity arise by divine design or will, they parallel divine or important human figures who often model such a vision of humanity in many religious traditions.

How does a Pluriform view square with biblical texts such as John 14:6 (Jesus as the only way to the Father), Acts 4:12 (Jesus as the only Savior), Philippians 2:9-11 (all will ultimately submit to Christ), and 1 John 5:12 (only those who have Christ have life)?

That Christ is the only way to the Father means that Christ provides the means to attain to a knowledge of God the Father in a peculiarly Christian epistemic process. This amounts to nothing more than an affirmation that a Christian conception of God (scil., the Son) is the only conduit through which to know another Christian conception of God (scil., the Father).

Salvation, properly understood, is a distinctively Christian concept that entails knowledge of God the Father and the Son (a knowledge identified with ‘eternal life’ in John 17:3). Since Christ reveals the Father, it is possible for St Peter to say that Christ alone is the source of salvation, understood in terms of acquiring knowledge of God the Father and the Son (Acts 4:12).

That all who follow their conscience and lead a moral life through the divine gift of their moral desires will, rather than being punished at the final judgement, enter life everlasting (Rom 2:6-16), attests to the truth of the affirmation that all will ultimately bow to and confess Christ as the one whose nature is identical to that of the one God who works in all religions and philosophies (Phil 2:9-11) as the source of their spiritual and moral life (1 Jn 5:12).[[39]](#footnote-39)

In what follows, we will enunciate the link between an eventual universal submission to Christ and a common human experience of the one God.

The Johannine Christ teaches that the being of God is found in him: ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me’ (Jn 14:11). In this perichoresis of Father and Son, the Holy Spirit, ‘who proceeds from the Father’ (Jn 15:26), is also present, as the divine person best connected, as the ubiquitous presence of God, with divine action in all religious traditions. The Spirit is the source of moral and religious insights for Christianity as for other religious traditions and even the irreligious, guiding all, through these insights, into a true knowledge of and personal relationship with God, the divine, or into a life-changing awareness of the ultimately significant, as their ontological and moral source.[[40]](#footnote-40) Pope Francis’s words to an interreligious audience in Paris chime with this: ‘to allow ourselves to be guided by the divine inspiration present in every faith.’[[41]](#footnote-41)

Any universalizing Christian theological framework will to varying degrees describe non-Christian religious traditions in ways that are etic (relying on an external framework to conceptualize a religious tradition) rather than emic (conceptualizing a religious tradition on its own terms).[[42]](#footnote-42) Not every religion has a one true God, for some are non-theistic, agnostic, pantheistic, or polytheistic; and the various religions will form different conceptions of Jesus. Yet human persons in general agree, at least implicitly, on certain dictates governing our conduct both as individuals and in groupings such as the family, friendship groups, or broader social associations founded on work or interests. One of these dictates is that of reciprocity, the ineradicable inner conviction that one should treat the other person, at least those whom one values, in a manner in which one would like to be treated by them; specifically, one that communicates respect, responsibility, integrity, empathy, and solicitude for or toward the other.

Evidenced across all religious traditions as well as humanism is the belief that humans did not create themselves and do not sustain their own existence, that they have not invested themselves with an inherent moral knowledge and ineradicable orientation toward moral values—that, consequently, something or someone else did so, whether this be designated God, gods, a divine or moral principle, or a natural law accounting for materiality and even human behavior.[[43]](#footnote-43) Consider, in this context, the words of Pope Francis in Azerbaijan: ‘Religions are called to help us understand that the center of each person is outside of himself, that we are oriented towards the Most High and towards the other who is our neighbor. In this way, the vocation of human life is to set out towards the highest and truest love: this alone is the culmination of every authentically religious aspiration.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

Consider also what he said in Kazakhstan: ‘For all human beings, the great religious and wisdom traditions are called to testify to the existence of a shared spiritual and moral patrimony, based on two principles: *transcendence* and *fraternity*. Transcendence, the Beyond, worship. It is impressive that each day millions and millions of men and women, of different ages, cultures and social conditions, join together in prayer in countless places of worship. This is the hidden force that makes our world move forward. And then fraternity, the other, proximity. For one cannot profess genuine fidelity to the Creator without showing love for his creatures.’[[45]](#footnote-45)

This suggests that the Pope believes that the Creator, as a single ‘hidden force’ whose demand for loyalty is heard in every religious faith, stands at the center of all religious faiths, as the one to whom all worship is directed and who calls human beings to love for one another as fellow creatures of God.

**Compatibility with Official Roman Catholic Teaching**

As a Jesuit, Bergoglio was influenced by the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1995) which mandated Jesuits to foster positive relationships with members of non-Christian faiths. Bergoglio evidently took this imperative to heart as auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires, coadjutor bishop, and then Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, in intentionally forging deep friendships with local Jewish and Muslim groups.

Pope Francis started off his papacy on the right foot with non-Christian religious groups, inviting interreligious leaders to pursue friendships across religious lines, not long before an appeal (*Evangelii gaudium*) to Christians to learn from other religions and work with non-religious persons, as those who seek truth, goodness, and beauty in upholding human rights, promoting peaceful coexistence among groups, and protecting the environment.

In Vatican II’s *Nostra aetate* (#2) the Roman Catholic Church made known that ‘she regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men,’ that is, the truth of Christ the Word (Jn 1:9), and so the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in non-Christian religions. At the same time, the Church is to persist in proclaiming Christ ‘“the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself’ (#2).

This Declaration is given a firm basis in the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen gentium*, which describes Muslims as being included in God’s salvific plan because they emulate the faith of Abraham and worship God as one and merciful and yet also the ultimate judge of humankind. The constitution also distinguishes between ‘those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God,’ from whom God as Creator, Provider, and Savior for all is not remote, and religious idolaters deceived by Satan (#16). The former can access salvation through divine help in the form of the good and truth that is present in their religious traditions so long as they are not culpable for their ignorance of the gospel or the Church (so long as they are ‘invincibly’ ignorant), but wholeheartedly pursue God as well as the doing of good works.

In a 1990 encyclical letter, Pope John Paul II took an evolving doctrine of non-Christian religions farther by teaching that Christ’s salvation is afforded not only to professing Christians and members of the Church, but ‘since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all’ (*Redemptoris missio* #10). The reason many people both today and historically have not had a chance to know and accept the gospel or become part of the Church is that ‘social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions.’ To these persons of goodwill, God makes salvation in Christ available through their free cooperation with an enlightening grace resulting from Christ’s sacrifice and communicated by the Holy Spirit, adapted to their spiritual and physical circumstances, operating outside the Church and mysteriously related to her.

It seems a fair interpretation on our part that this statement recognizes that there will be many people who in virtue of an existing religious commitment will see no need to profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and become Roman Catholic believers. Ultimately, every person, regardless of their religious or non-religious faith, does already exist in a relationship of fundamental communion with God (whether God be known as such) as ontological and moral source of their human existence.

A question may arise from the fact that *Dominus Iesus,* the much-discussed 2001 Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, can describe adherents of non-Christian religious traditions in the following wise, ‘If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation’ (#22; emphasis in the original).

What are we to make of this in light of a Pluriform view? Only that any religion, including Christianity itself, would be deficient if considered in isolation from the ontological and moral source that is Christ. The declaration indicates as the community, in comparison to which non-Christians are found ‘in a gravely deficient situation’ in an objective sense, only those Christian believers who ‘in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.’ The emphasis falls here on the divine work of grace upon human persons in such a religious community. In concrete reality, *Dominus Iesus* does not declare to be spiritually deficient those in non-Christian religious traditions who may also have the work of divine grace operating in their lives.

What of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states (#846), ‘they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary [for salvation] by God through Christ [the mediator and the way of salvation], would refuse either to enter it or remain in it’? The next clause (#847) clarifies that #846 is ‘not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience.’

In an extrinsic way, it can indeed be said that these persons do not know the Gospel or the Church. Essentially, however, as we have previously proposed, every religious or irreligious person does already know God, in that they know or have the means to acknowledge an ontological and moral source of their human existence, whether they know this as ‘God’ or under some other name.

Pluriformity as a theological possibility, binding as it does the Christian doctrine of salvation as mediated exclusively in Christ with the belief that all religions are spiritually equal, explodes the fallacy that these two affirmations exist in a relationship of abject contradiction. To that extent, the Pope cannot be justifiably accused of violating the doctrine of exclusive salvation in Christ simply because he teaches that all religions are a path to reach God.

Perhaps the too scrupulous tone of *Dominus Iesus* has been overcome in practice by the sheer joy of Pope Francis’s talk of religious pluralism, for instance in an address to the International Peace Conference in Cairo, 28 April 2017. Praising Egypt as ‘a *land of civilizations and a land of covenants*’ [italics in the original],[[46]](#footnote-46) and calling on the intercession of ‘Saint Francis of Assisi, who eight centuries ago came to Egypt and met Sultan Malik al Kamil,’[[47]](#footnote-47) the Pope took up words spoken by Pope John Paul II in Cairo, showing a continuity in the post-Vatican II Church in the practice of rejoicing in the new possibilities of interreligious exchange: ‘We live under the sun of the one merciful God…. Thus, in a true sense, we can call one another brothers and sisters… since without God the life of man would be like the heavens without the sun.’[[48]](#footnote-48)

In Egypt, not only did the sun of wisdom rise, but also the variegated light of the religions shone in this land. Here, down the centuries, differences of religion constituted ‘a form of mutual enrichment in the service of the one national community.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Different faiths met and a variety of cultures blended without being confused, while acknowledging the importance of *working together for the common good*. Such ‘covenants’ are urgently needed today. Here I would take as a symbol the ‘Mount of the Covenant’ which rises up in this land. Sinai reminds us above all that authentic covenants on earth cannot ignore heaven, that human beings cannot attempt to encounter one another in peace by eliminating God from the horizon, nor can they climb the mountain to appropriate God for themselves.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**Pastoral Implications from and for the Church in Asia**

In one sense, the Pope’s 2024 Singapore comments represent but a natural phase in his development in interreligious appreciation through his early exposure to significant Christian figures and groups respectful toward and appreciative of other religions and his friendly interactions with members of other religions themselves.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In one of his most remarkable statements, delivered in Kazakhstan, Pope Francis disagreed that religion should be viewed as a socially ‘destabilizing’ factor. Instead, he sees religion as playing a vital role in directing people’s attention toward the finitude of human existence in light of a divine transcendence which engenders a sense of a shared spiritual vocation and universal fraternity. Therefore, human beings everywhere are called to practice mutual religious respect, care for the vulnerable, and environmental protection, as well as to promote global peace.[[52]](#footnote-52)

It is no accident that some of Pope Francis’s most incisive statements affirming interreligious understanding have been made in Asia. Such exhortations are particularly germane in a region where Christian communities constitute a demographic minority in many cases. Herein may lie the contribution of the Asian church; that its distinctive socioreligious context is able to move a religious figure of the stature of the Pope to deliver gritty utterances with a global reach in favor of peace and understanding between members of religious groups.

In many Asian countries, the Christian community, constituting as it does a minority of varying sizes, encounters, especially in urban areas, both soft and direct pressure to respect and dialogue with other religious communities. This has the practical consequence of fostering theological contemplation relating to God’s will in the midst of religious plurality. It is little wonder that Pope Francis’s urgings toward mutual appreciation beyond one’s own faith were met with acclamation from his live audiences in Kazakhstan as well as Singapore.

An unfortunate effect of being a religious minority is a proclivity to exclude other religious groups, sometimes mutually. Not only does placing other religious groups on a lower rung yield no real benefits for any group but it may have little biblical warrant, considering how the Scriptures do not so much denounce non-Christian religions as they do hypocritical, idolatrous, or immoral beliefs and practices in any religious tradition, including Christianity.

Given these circumstances, it is useful to consider Pope Francis’s approach to interreligious relations, which avoids syncretism, relativism, as well as uniformity. As he said to leaders of different religious groups in Assisi, ‘Without syncretism or relativism, we have rather prayed side by side and for each other.’[[53]](#footnote-53) *Evangelii gaudium* gives a central role to interreligious dialogue in the Church’s mission. This dialogue ‘neither flattens religious differences nor avoids sharing about one’s religious convictions out of political correctness…. Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another’ (#251).

Yet preaching the Gospel does not involve proselytization or compelling a person to become a Christian, as Pope Francis underscored in South Korea. Instead, the Church creates a space for people to voluntarily become a Christian through being naturally attracted to the Gospel and the Church.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The pontiff has emphasized that religious plurality, being willed of God as are differences in sex, ethnicity, and language, has to be respected in its internal and external expressions.[[55]](#footnote-55) Strikingly, in Kazakhstan the Pope extolled the role of interreligious dialogue as ‘no longer merely something expedient: it is an urgent-needed and incomparable service to humanity, to the praise and glory of the Creator of all.’[[56]](#footnote-56)

In conclusion I would note that these statements of Pope Francis’s reach beyond local contexts and mark a profound transformation bearing on the Church as a whole. For far too long, Christianity has been conceived in a religiously-exclusive manner not warranted by the testimony of the Scriptures. Once more, subordinating other religious groups beneath one’s own is of no long-term advantage for any group. Far better to plumb the depths of biblical teaching and discover a truly inclusive vision of the Christian faith, a theological reason to accept and love our religious neighbor rather than exclude them.[[57]](#footnote-57)

**Jérôme de Gramont**

**Narrative and Existence: Kafka and Beckett**

Jérôme de Gramont is a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in the Institut Catholique de Paris. His readings of modernist literature are informed by Phenomenology. His latest publications include *Kafkabuch* (2015) and *Proust, le présent perdu,* both published by Éditions de Corlevour.

Pope Francis’s recent Letter on the importance of literature in Christian formation (republished in the Autumn issue of this journal) is an astonishing document, which encourages us to find theological depth even in writers who are silent about God or who appear to profess atheistic or nihilistic standpoints. Moreover, when these writers throw light on human existence they acquire immediate pertinence for a faith which promises a divine future to humanity and which centers on the mystery of God becoming human in the Incarnation.

In *Le livre à venir,* Maurice Blanchot offers ‘a new understanding of literary space’ (317) as he registers the limits of traditional narrative: ‘We have to register a basic fact: we have the poorest books that can be imagined, and we go on reading, after several millennia, as if we were still just beginning to learn to read’ (319). We might go so far as to say that the books here referred to merely repeat the first great work of European literature, Homer’s *Odyssey*, which brought that literature to its pinnacle from the outset. For all its poetic richness, the poem allows the structure of its plot to emerge clearly, and the course of its story—the succession of trials Ulysses (Odysseus) must undergo to become Ulysses—yields the fundamental framework of literary narration, taken up by countless storytellers, from Virgil to Dante, from Chaucer to Milton, from Cervantes to Defoe, from Goethe and Balzac to Proust and Joyce. All of these writers map human existence as an odyssey, and give it meaning by providing beginnings, adventures, and ends.

But some stories fail or refuse to reach their expected denouement. These ‘failed’ stories are poor not by the predictability of their structure than by their lack of structured narrative. These stories are so averse to narrative that they would subtract episodes from the *Odyssey* and tales from the *Thousand and One Nights* rather than add to them. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1767)*—*a comic autobiography which manages to get as far as its author’s infancy—is often quoted as an early example of such narratives about the impossibility of narrative. They are like a book that fades as it is written, or that launches into a story only to transform it immediately into a stillborn narrative, gesturing toward a tale that never gets told. This, too, might be called a kind of *Odyssey*, but without a decisive protagonist like Odysseus, or even like Telemachus. It is Penelope’s *Odyssey*—a tapestry woven and unwoven that never assumes the status of a work.

In the twentieth century such narratives betoken not only a crisis or mutation of story-telling, but a crisis or mutation of existence itself. The human being that faces us in these stories does not step forth as a confident hero or a striking tragic protagonist. Rather something uncanny comes to light, a new humanity that we might be tempted to call post-human. Yet when we look into the mirror of these stories, we may see ourselves, and recognize that our existence is more enigmatic than we had thought.

**‘The Silence of the Sirens’**

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is the most important of these re-thinkers and rewriters of human existence. There is no better entry into his unsettling world than to read one of those very short stories of his which cast a strange spell and carry a weight of enigmatic significance. Their effect is to make our relationship with the world even more problematic than it already was. Later, we may well lose ourselves in the maze of a world-sized courthouse, in which ‘everyone is part of the court,’ and ‘there are clerks’ offices in almost every attic,’ as the painter Titorelli teaches Joseph K. in *The Trial.* Even the insufferable little girls who harass Joseph K. during his visit to the painter: ‘“These girls are also part of the court.” “What do you mean?” asked K., tilting his head to the side to look at the painter. But the latter sat down again in his chair and said, half in jest, half in explanation: “Everyone is part of the tribunal, right?”’ (1990:202). Joseph K. has a long discussion with a young clergyman in the cathedral, who tells him: ‘Your trial will perhaps not proceed beyond a low-level judgment. Your guilt is held at least provisionally to be proven’ (289). He finally reveals that he too is an agent of the court: ‘“First understand who I am, said the clergyman.” “You are the prison chaplain,” said K.… “So I am part of the court,” said the clergyman’ (304). For Joseph K. There is no escape from the labyrinth. But aren’t all of us always already lost, since we were born into the world, bereft of place, meaning, and innocence?

The short sketch to which Max Brod gave the title ‘The Silence of the Sirens’ (‘Das Schweigen des Sirenes’ [Kafka 1992:40-2]) is emblematic of the way Kafka ‘loses’ his reader. As a Jewish storyteller par excellence, he amuses himself by rewriting an episode from Canto XII of the *Odyssey*, the Greek myth *kat'exokhen*. Here is the Homeric episode:

We drove past swiftly, but when we were within hail of the shore, the Sirens could not fail to see our speeding vessel, and began their clear singing: ‘Famous *[Odysseus](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.php%23Odysseus)*, great glory of *[Achaea](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.php%23Achaea)*, draw near, and bring your ship to rest, and listen to our voices. No man rows past this isle in his dark ship without hearing the honeysweet sound from our lips. He delights in it and goes his way a wiser man. We know all the suffering the *[Argives](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.php%23Argives)* and the *[Trojans](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.php%23Trojans)* endured, by the gods’ will, on the wide plains of Troy. We know everything that comes to pass on the fertile Earth.’ This was the haunting song the Sirens sang, and I longed to listen, commanding my crew by my expression to set me free. But they bent to their oars and rowed harder, while *[Perimedes](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.php%23Perimedes)* and *[Eurylochus](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.php%23Eurylochus)* rose and tightened my bonds and added more rope. Not till they had rowed beyond the Sirens, so we no longer heard their voices and song, did my loyal friends clear the wax that plugged their ears, and untie me. (Trans. A. S. Kline)

In what Walter Benjamin describes as a ‘fairy tale for dialecticians’ (117), Kafka introduces a number of sleight-of-hand tricks. Although the story’s starting point is quite simple, it later gives rise to some truly dizzying exegetical subtleties, which give it a midrashic character (Mosès, 25-6), so that the adventures of Ulysses as he travels between Troy and Ithaca are followed by an even greater wandering of interpretations. When the mermaids approach, Ulysses has himself tied securely to the mast, and to better protect himself from their song, he also plugs his ears with wax. He does not realize that the sirens’ song is so powerful that it pierces even wax and bewitches the hearer to the point of breaking the chains and the mast. No matter, since he imagines he can triumph over the sirens’ power with this stratagem. But Kafka’s story transforms the sirens’ song into their silence, which is even more dangerous for sailors. Homer’s mermaid song is the most beautiful imaginable, but Kafka’s mermaids are beyond the imaginable, since they don’t sing. It has indeed never happened, but is perhaps imaginable, that someone saved himself from their song—but certainly not from their silence.

This apologue is not the only example in Kafka’s work of the *via eminentiae* being turned into a *via negativa*, and of art being brought to such incandescence that it fades away. Josephine, the famous singer of the Mouse People (‘Josefine, die Sängerin, oder Das Volk der Mäuse’; 1994:350-77), can barely sing, perhaps even squeaking less well than most of her peers, yet ‘one who has not heard her does not know the power of song.’ The two helpers entrusted to K. in *The Castle* have no instruments and know nothing of the art of surveying, but this does not prevent Klamm from sending a letter of congratulations to the surveyor and his helpers for their work: ‘To Mr Surveyor at the Brückenhof! I fully recognize the surveying work you have carried out to date. The works of your two assistants are equally worthy of praise; you know how to make them work. Persevere in this zeal! Complete your tasks!’ (1983:187). In another example, the world-record-holding swimmer, duly cheered by the crowd, finally admits that he can't swim: ‘Dear guests! Admittedly, I’m the holder of a world record, but if you were to ask me how I set it, I wouldn’t be able to give you a satisfactory answer. In fact, I can’t swim at all.’ Marcel Proust was not far off the mark when, in a parenthesis, he noted that ‘bathing masters are cautious, rarely knowing how to swim’ (685), but Kafka, as we can see, goes even further, since it’s no longer a question of teaching but of excelling. Another fragment shows how memory makes it impossible to swim: ‘I can swim like the others, it’s just that I have a better memory than the others, I haven’t forgotten the time when I couldn’t swim. But since I haven’t forgotten it, there’s no point in me knowing how to swim, and in the end I can’t swim’ (2002:334).

Memory erases what it knows and returns to its ignorance. Those who have gone furthest along the path of their art discover the nullity of art, unless we should rather say the nullity of the path, and that not knowing accomplishes knowledge, just as not producing anything brings to completion the activity of producing. But to discover this, we had to take the exercise to the extreme. (To put it another way, not all silences are those of Rimbaud bidding farewell to poetry.)

This conversion of art brought to its peak and its effacement has caught the attention of some good readers of Kafka: Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Giorgio Agamben. They may well take us to the heart of Kafka’s work.

Deleuze (on the swimming champion who cannot swim): ‘All writing involves athleticism, but far from reconciling literature with sports, or making writing an Olympic game, this athleticism is exercised in organic flight and defection’ (12).

Chrétien (on remembering and forgetting how to swim): ‘The unforgettable here is the unsurpassable, that to which nothing can really be added and that which nothing can change. To remember the time when you couldn’t swim, to remember it perfectly, would be to reproduce that ineptitude again and again, to be afraid of water again and again. Unlike Platonic reminiscence, learning here means forgetting, forgetting what we were, how we were, who we were before. The perfect appropriation of ourselves to what we once were, the perfect retention of what we once were, would prohibit all learning’ (2000:86).

Agamben: ‘Hence the relevance of those figures of creation so frequent in Kafka, who define the great artist by an absolute incapacity with regard to his art. On the one hand, this is the confession of the great swimmer.... On the other, there’s the extraordinary singer of the Mouse People, Josephine, who not only can't sing, but can barely whistle like her fellows…. Never perhaps as with these figures has the common conception of art as knowledge or habitus been so radically challenged: Josephine sings with her inability to sing, just as the great swimmer swims with his inability to swim’ (42-3).

When the sirens fall silent, there’s no need to be surprised. Where there is art, there is the possibility of producing and retaining, and where there is great art, of retaining even more than producing. It is by the absence of their song that we must now recognize the sirens or Josephine. If we see this motif repeated, it’s because it goes to the heart of Kafka’s work—the writer’s work, which is as much about not writing as about writing. The approach to the work goes hand in hand with the retreat from the work; the demand to write is the measure of its impossibility; the extreme advance of art touches on an impotence. All this will seem absurd to anyone who has not ventured into the territories of writing, to anyone who has never felt the lure of song and silence. How could they possibly understand the Great Swimmer, those to whom swimming is so easy?

But Kafka’s apologue is not just about taking note of the sirens’ silence; it’s also about making that silence speak and interpreting it. The withdrawal of the song is followed by the plurality of exegeses—two were enough, and the discussion never seems to end. Infinity begins with two. Kafka’s Ulysses outdoes the Homeric Ulysses’ cunning, since not content with allowing himself to be tied to the mast, he also puts wax in his ears to prevent himself from succumbing to the sirens’ lure. But Kafka’s mermaids outdo the seduction of Homer’s mermaids, as they remain silent and lure the sailors with the mime of song rather than actual singing, ‘the movements of their necks, their deep breathing, their tear-filled eyes, their half-open mouths,’ their whole bodies as they stretch ‘more beautiful than ever,’ making them believe in the song that is not taking place. Who, then, of Ulysses or the sirens, will have triumphed over the other party? The performers are divided into two camps, and neither wins. Kafka’s dialectic raises argument against argument. If someone suspects that Ulysses may have guessed that the mermaids were silent, another might reply that Kafka’s mermaids, unlike Homer’s, don't die after Ulysses has passed—a sign that they have proved themselves even stronger than he was? There is no hope of putting an end to the endless conflict of interpretations, where not even a god can settle the matter: ‘Ulysses, it is said, was so ingenious and cunning that the goddess of Fate herself was unable to penetrate the depths of his soul.’ And how much more that of the mermaids since it is said shortly before: ‘If the mermaids were endowed with a conscience, they would then have been annihilated, but they remained as they were….’ The silence of the sirens is now filled by the infinity of interpretations.

**‘Before the Law’**

It’s no different in *The* *Trial*, starting with the parable ‘Before the Law,’ told by the clergyman in the cathedral, which is a kind of summary. A man from the countryside comes to enter the Law, but a guard forbids him access. The man waits a lifetime, and eventually dies without gaining access to the Law (1990:292-5). This seemingly simple story, as simple as the siren episode, once again gives rise to an avalanche of midrashic exegeses on whether or not the man was deceived by the guardian, exegeses from which the reader may or may not emerge dazed. Countless articles and book chapters have been written on this page, again multiple conflicting interpretations to fill a void: the unknown law. The only conclusion lies in the dismay of the interpreters: ‘The text is immutable and the opinions are often no more than expressions of the despair over it’ (298).

In a way, this question: ‘What does the Law say?’ accompanies the whole of Joseph K.’s life. That there is a Law is indisputable, and its presence weighs on every day of Joseph K.’s life, but no more than Kant’s moral law, the Law cannot be brought down to any concrete proposition. In a commentary on both Kafka and Kant, Deleuze (46) writes: ‘The Law is not known, because there is nothing in it to be known.’ This is thoroughly faithful to Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, in which the Law *silently* tells us just one thing: ‘you must.’ Heidegger similarly stresses the silence of conscience: ‘Conscience speaks only and constantly in the mode of silence’ (*Being and Time* #56; Heidegger, 363). Kafka’s villagers in ‘The Chinese Wall’ suppose that the Law is known in the distant imperial capital: ‘In Peking, to be sure, and in the court society, there is some clarity, even if this is more apparent than real,’ and also in the higher schools, but the more one descends to the lower ones, the more one’s half-educated uncertainty has recourse to ‘a few doctrines rammed in for centuries, which indeed have lost nothing of eternal truth but in this mist and cloud also remain eternally unknown’ (1993:349). ‘What torment it is to be governed by laws one does not know!... For the character of laws thus requires secrecy about their content’ (1993: as quoted in Deleuze, 45).

Had Joseph K. been slandered? This is the question that every reader asks himself on the first page of The *Trial* (‘Someone must have slandered Joseph K., because one morning, without him having done anything wrong, he was arrested’), but which he is likely to have forgotten two or three hundred pages later. Whether he is innocent or guilty, the trial will take its course and the sentence will fall, or rather the verdict will be will fall but not the sentence, for if Joseph K. is indeed executed on the last page of the novel, it is without the court having met to deliver its verdict. The last sentence of *The* *Trial* does indeed say that Joseph K. dies (‘like a dog’), but not that his story ends: ‘as if it were shame that would outlive him,’ which should be understood to mean that his trial will continue even after his death. Obviously, it takes a lifetime, and perhaps more, to understand a man’s life, so how can we judge it in this environment? In a way, we all die before we know the Law and how we are or are not guilty (in fact, how we are).

So nothing more can be promised to Joseph K., even if he is innocent, than a provisional acquittal or a judgment that is constantly on hold. Once the highly improbable hypothesis of a definitive acquittal has been ruled out (which, in Titorelli the painter's memory, has never happened), or the less desirable one of an apparent acquittal (the accusation still hanging over the accused’s head), there is nothing left to hope for but an acquittal, which isn’t really an acquittal at all, and which Kafka calls ‘an indefinite adjournment,’ a process in which the trial doesn’t come to an end, but is durably maintained at its lower level. We must conclude from this prism of judicial possibilities—and the most enviable possibilities—that even if conviction is prevented, actual acquittal can never take place either, so that we have nothing more to hope for in this life than an indefinite prolongation of the trial. As Deleuze puts it: ‘But precisely this indefinite prolongation leads us less to paradise than it already installs us in hell here below. It announces immortality less than it distills a “slow death,” and never ceases to *defer the judgment of the law.*’

**‘The New Lawyer’**

We can now understand what Kafka’s world is all about. It is a world where mermaids and opera singers don’t sing, where champion swimmers don’t swim, and where judges don’t dispense justice because they never reach a final verdict. A world waiting for a Messiah who never comes: ‘The Messiah will only come when he is no longer needed, he will only come one day after his arrival, he will not come at the last, but on the very last day,’ where the construction of the Chinese wall will never be completed (‘Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer’; 1993:337-57), where the traveler will never reach his destination (*The Castle*), where the imperial messenger will never deliver his message (‘Eine kaiserliche Botschaft’; 1994:280-2), and where the man who set out for the nearest village will never reach it (‘Das nächste Dorf’; 280). Perhaps the only exception is ‘In the Penal Colony’ (203-48), where the discovery of the Law takes place at the moment of death, in a mixture of ecstasy and unspeakable suffering—a knowledge to rejoice over. This world is one where existence is thrown down paths that go astray and fail to reach a goal: work without work, song without song, learning without learning, engagement without marriage, waiting for the Law without entering the Law. A world where the new lawyer is called Bucephalus, Alexander’s horse without Alexander’s glory, destined to study the Law indefinitely, but with no guarantee of ever applying it. Kafka dedicated another of his masterful short stories to him, ‘Der neue Advocat’ (251-2).

Today, the great myths that uplifted Greek humanity are exhausted, and the God of the Jewish world has withdrawn into a secret where men can know nothing of him. Today, the sirens no longer sing, Poseidon has become a mere administrator of the waters, busy all day checking his account books and no longer even having the time to travel the seas and oceans.

He had hardly ever seen the seas, even briefly, during his hurried ascents to Olympus, and had never really crossed them. He used to say that he was waiting for the world to end, and that when it did, there would be a moment of tranquility that would allow him, just before the end, and after verifying the last calculation, to hurry around the seas.

Does Bucephalus still remember that he was once the proud steed of the Great Alexander?: ‘We have a new lawyer, Dr Bucephalus. There is little in his appearance that recalls the days when he was Alexander of Macedon’s warhorse.’ Today, Alexander’s glory is dead and Bucephalus has become the new lawyer. Today, the adventure that led Alexander and his horse to the gates of India seems so remote in time that we can’t even tell where the gates of India are in space.

Even then, the gates of India were out of reach, but the king's sword pointed in their direction. Today these gates have been moved, they are somewhere else altogether, farther away and higher up; no one points in their direction; many hold swords, but only to twirl them in the air, and the gaze that wants to follow them goes astray.

Today, Bucephalus’ only courage lies in leafing through old law books. But while the story shows him tirelessly studying the Law, it does not say that he knows it. Nor does the countryman in the parable of the *Trial*, who we’re told has spent many years studying the guardian of the Law. So it is that Bucephalus turns the pages of our law books, and becomes acquainted with many articles of code, jurisprudence, and interpretations of the law, so that he becomes immersed in his reading, i.e. *properly lost in it*.

That’s why it’s perhaps best to immerse oneself, as Bucephalus did, in the legislative codes. Free, his flanks relieved of the pressure of the ride’s lumbar vertebrae, by the light of a quiet lamp, far from the din of Alexander's battle, he reads and turns the pages of our old manuals.

It takes a lifetime to wait for the Messiah who will come too late for us, or to study the Law we will never know.

**Beckett’s Unraveling**

A foremost example of a narrative that advances by failure, undoing all the securities of the Odyssean framework, is Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, dating from 1953, which is recited by an incessant, interminable, unbegun voice that can do nothing but repeat the difficulty of beginning, continuing, and ending. The voice multiplies words and yet confesses its incapacity to speak, like Penelope weaving and unweaving her web. She has no other wish than to be able to begin her story—‘The best would be not to begin. But I have to begin. That is to say I have to go on’ (5)—and one day be silent—‘And that day, I don’t know why, I shall be able to go silent, and make an end, I know it’ (19). But her misfortune is to be delivered to this incessant speech, incapable of beginning or end. The famous ‘I’ll go on’ with which the text ends is perhaps less a plucky resolve than a recognition of inescapable destiny. Some find a positive, quasi-nirvanic sense in ‘this silence they are always talking about, from which, supposedly, he came, to which he will return when his act is over’ (124; see Moorjani). Be that as it may, the enactment of the impossibility of narrative makes existence itself problematic; the impossibility of telling is an impossibility of being.

The first twenty pages, a ‘preamble’ (19) in seventeen paragraphs, have a semblance of narrative, as the speaker attempts to map the dim space around him, conjuring up some figures from earlier Beckett tales, such as Malone and Molloy, who have been surrogates for the speaker, its ‘vice-existers’ or ‘avatars’ (37-8). Then the speaker makes a resolution: ‘All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone’ (21). The remaining 158 pages then form a single unbroken paragraph. A story with nothing to recount, without any event, without any plot other than the thread of a voice that is obliged to go on speaking but that has literally nothing to say: ‘I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak’ (36). There are stretches of narrative, or nightmarish fantasy—an account of the avatar Mahood’s life in a jar under the care of Marguerite or Madeleine (53-80) and an account of Mahood’s successor Worm, The voice tells stories but deep down it is convinced that there is no story to tell, and that ‘any old thing’ (53, 137-8, 143-4) will do to fill the void of time. How could this story not be the poorest in the world, caught in the contradiction between this injunction: ‘I must speak,’ and the realization of this impossibility: ‘I can’t’—a contradiction that reduces all possibility of storytelling to zero. ‘So I am obliged to add this: I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak (and therefore perhaps think a little), cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am; but can a little, sufficiently (I don’t know how, unimportant), in relation to me who was elsewhere (who shall be elsewhere) and to those places where I was (where I shall be)’ (18).

Unsurprisingly, from a certain point anything recognizable as narrative is abandoned: ‘no point in telling yourself stories, to pass the time, stories don’t pass the time, nothing passes the time,’ yet ‘No more stories from this day forth, and the stories go on, it’s stories still, or it was never stories, always any old thing’ (137). Of course the voice has tried to shake off the fiction of ‘I’ many times, in vain: ‘I shall not say I again, ever again, it’s too farcical.’ (94). The speaker has tried to shake off Mahood and bring his more faceless successor Worm into existence; ‘Mahood I couldn’t die. Worm will I ever get born?’ (90).

The decision ‘No more stories’ is followed by a seven-page sentence (137-44), and we recall how Beckett had studied the supreme autobiographical novelist Proust, master of such sentences. It is followed by a string of crisp short sentences attempting to impose a controlled protocol: ‘But I really mustn’t ask myself any more questions, if it’s I, I really must not’ (144), as already resolved much earlier: ‘I’ll ask no more questions’ (26). But despite these ‘resolutions’ of course the voice will ‘carry on cheerfully as before’ (145). From now on the narration shrinks to tortured rumination on the speaker’s situation and on the postulated ‘they,’ his ‘purveyors’ (89), who are imagined as manipulating him or spying on him. The solitude becomes stark: ‘there was never anyone, anyone but me, anything but me, talking to me of me, impossible to stop, impossible to go on, but I must go on. I’ll go on, without anyone, without anything, but me, but my voice, that is to say I’ll stop’ (151).

Let’s take a closer look at the first page, which doesn't begin, and the last, which doesn’t end.

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning, I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on. (3)

These opening questions are not to be answered hastily. Whoever speaks has the right to say ‘I.’ One who doesn’t have a name may not have a pronoun either: ‘there is no name for me, no pronoun for me’ (164). A voice speaks, but without a name, without a pronoun, and is nobody's voice. So whenever the unnamable ventures to pronounce ‘my voice,’ it hastens to add—and adding means correcting, subtracting—‘I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me’ (3). It doesn’t matter who speaks, ‘he, I, no matter’ (164). The indefinite article is also to be found in ‘a voice.’ For the initial question: ‘Who is speaking in Samuel Beckett's books? What is this indefatigable “I” that apparently always says the same thing?’ (Blanchot, 286), Blanchot very soon substitutes another question: ‘But is it he who speaks? What is this void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears into it?’ (287).

To the question: ‘Who is speaking here? What is this ‘I’ condemned to speak without rest?’ we’d like to answer by resorting to the ‘security of a name,’ Samuel Beckett’s if need be, by returning the narrative to the ‘guarantee of a consciousness,’ by inscribing it ‘in a world that spares us the worst misfortune, that of having lost the power to say I’ (289). (Compare Simone Weil: ‘Nothing in the world can rob us the power to say I. Nothing, except extreme unhappiness’ [35].) But Beckett’s narrative carries us away from all the stable conventional references, to a place of empty speech that is nobody’s speech—neither the voice of a fictitious I, that nameless character, nor the voice of the author, but the voice of the narration itself, ‘under the threat of the impersonal,’ an incessant, interminable voice which is that of the work itself, approaching its origin, ‘approaching a neutral speech that speaks to itself alone’ (290). The voice is threatening because it dispossesses every person, and also threatens the work itself because it approaches a terrible region where it ‘undergoes the test of impossibility’ (294). Beckett’s narrative describes this experience of the work that is nobody’s experience, where the work begins again and again without ever managing to begin, plods on and exhausts itself in this endless movement—‘a pure approach to the movement from which all books come, to that original point where without doubt the work is lost, which always ruins the work’ (290-1).

Who is speaking? Nobody, the ‘outside’—so that Évelyne Grossman (101) can call *The Unnamable* an ‘exterior’ rather than an interior monologue. This exteriority is espoused by some stories in our time more than others. We may wonder why we should allow this threatening experience, ‘threatening for the one who carries it, threatening for the work’ (Blanchot, 294). But we cannot prevent the experience from taking place, shattering the illusion that a character, or a writer, may speak in their own name, as they settle into the intimacy of their consciousness and the assurance of being able to say I. This threat resembles the ontological argument: as soon as it is possible, it exists.

Let’s return to the last page of the story, even if it doesn’t deliver the final word:

I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on. (179)

This page is composed not just to repeat the impossibility of speaking, but to continue, despite everything, to go on insisting, as if impossibility were here being transformed into imminence (‘it will be I’). It’s as if the nearly two hundred pages of the unnamable’s monologue were concluding less with failure than with this possibility of a coming to oneself, a possibility envisaged as still to come: the possibility of a beginning that has not yet taken place but that nothing obliges us to think is impossible. This possibility will always be there as long as there are words, at ‘the threshold of my story.’ It’s as if Beckett’s narrative had accompanied the unnamable right up to the moment when he *might be* born. It is this possibility, however tenuous, that Jean-Louis Chrétien’s reading retains. Even if the narrative continues to be caught up in the same contradiction: ‘you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on,’ nothing obliges us to admit that this incapacity has the last word. Perhaps we may await a beginning, perhaps a story, perhaps a name. The one who speaks incessantly is the one who seeks, by dint of words, to say just one, his own, I.

Of course, it is not enough for the unnamable to say ‘it will be I’ for imminence to become reality. Nor is it enough for Chrétien to interpret *The Unnamable* as an account of ‘the conditions of possibility of a first-person narrative’ (2009:262) to remove the difficulties of achieving this. Nothing is left out of the objections and obstacles: ‘This quest for the self, for a voice of one’s own, for an identity, is the common thread running through *The Unnamable*, even if it presents itself as virtually impossible’ (265). Indeed, Samuel Beckett’s entire body of work never ceases to radically question the very identity of self and consciousness. Whereas speech is illuminated from a center that is the very possibility of saying ‘I,’ Beckett’s narrative casts doubt on this center and this clarity. Where the central question of *The Unnamable* is presented as the possibility of the absence of a center, because the ‘I’ would have to give way to an ‘it’ or a ‘that’ (264), the threat described by Blanchot of ‘a wandering word, not deprived of meaning, but deprived of center’ (1959:286) is not far away. Yet what Chrétien calls ‘the pending monologue (*monologue en* *souffrance*) of *The Unnamable*’ (287) is no longer simply oriented towards the approach of a neutral word, as in Blanchot, but this time towards the perpetual expectation of a word of one’s own.

The approach of the impersonal (Blanchot), the difficult coming to oneself of the person (Chrétien)—how can the same story lend itself to two such diametrically opposed interpretations? Or is this question itself absurd? Could there be a story if it didn’t draw its resources from an essential ambiguity? Blanchot in fact defines literature as ‘language making itself ambiguity’ (1949:328), and Chrétien (2009:260) writes: ‘But with *The Unnamable,* on this point as so many others, a profound undecidability appears.’ Is this cult of ambiguity merely the Byzantinism Julien Benda (1945) denounced in French literature since Mallarmé? Or does it reach to an essential aspect of human existence? Perhaps in every narrative there have to be two narratives: a narrative of the day when stories (of oneself and the world) are constructed, and a narrative of the night when they are unraveled—as in Penelope’s *Odyssey*.

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**Trends & Events**

**Statistics of the Catholic Church in Japan 2023**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sapporo | 285 | 14,046 | 14,331 | 0.294 |
| Sendai | 162 | 8,913 | 9,075 | 0.143 |
| Niigata | 78 | 6,599 | 6,677 | 0.161 |
| Saitama | 165 | 19,247 | 19,412 | 0.150 |
| Tokyo | 1,496 | 93,359 | 94,855 | 0.466 |
| Yokohama | 531 | 52,513 | 53,044 | 0.340 |
| Nagoya | 291 | 26,423 | 26,714 | 0.210 |
| Kyoto | 199 | 17,313 | 17,512 | 0.250 |
| Osaka-  Takamatsu | 728 | 49,928 | 50,656 | 0.312 |
| Hiroshima | 251 | 19,138 | 19,389 | 0.270 |
| Fukuoka | 270 | 28,810 | 29,080 | 0.383 |
| Nagasaki | 867 | 56,194 | 57,061 | 4.370 |
| Oita | 246 | 5,587 | 5,833 | 0.266 |
| Kagoshima | 132 | 8,120 | 8,252 | 0.533 |
| Naha | 70 | 6,140 | 6,210 | 0.418 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **TOTAL** | **5,771** | **412,330** | **418,101** | **0.335** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2022 | 6,135 | 416,315 | 422,450 | 0.335 |
| 2021 | 6,200 | 424,900 | 431,100 | 0.340 |
| 2020 | 6,335 | 428,748 | 435,083 | 0.342 |
| 2019 | 6,537 | 431,070 | 437,607 | 0.343 |
| 2018 | 6,782 | 434,111 | 440,893 | 0.345 |
| 2017 | 7,019 | 433,813 | 440,832 | 0.345 |
| 2016 | 7,216 | 434,054 | 441,107 | 0.344 |
| 2015 | 7,355 | 436,505 | 443,721 | 0.346 |
| 2014 | 7,771 | 436,291 | 443,646 | 0.345 |
| 2013 | 7,848 | 436,670 | 444,441 | 0.346 |

**Adult and Infant Baptisms**

|  |  | | |  |  | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |  | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| Sapporo | 33 | 34 | 67 |  | 13 | 11 | 24 |
| Sendai | 29 | 26 | 55 |  | 10 | 9 | 19 |
| Niigata | 8 | 13 | 21 |  | 11 | 13 | 24 |
| Saitama | 75 | 67 | 142 |  | 111 | 118 | 229 |
| Tokyo | 299 | 389 | 688 |  | 194 | 198 | 392 |
| Yokohama | 90 | 125 | 215 |  | 150 | 165 | 315 |
| Nagoya | 72 | 81 | 153 |  | 167 | 177 | 344 |
| Kyoto | 72 | 59 | 131 |  | 82 | 71 | 153 |
| Osaka-Takamatsu | 137 | 143 | 280 |  | 104 | 111 | 215 |
| Hiroshima | 54 | 61 | 115 |  | 52 | 44 | 96 |
| Fukuoka | 41 | 50 | 91 |  | 49 | 32 | 81 |
| Nagasaki | 18 | 52 | 70 |  | 69 | 51 | 120 |
| Oita | 11 | 12 | 23 |  | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| Kagoshima | 16 | 14 | 30 |  | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Naha | 9 | 10 | 19 |  | 14 | 8 | 22 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **TOTAL 2023** | **964** | **1,136** | **2,100** |  | **1,039** | **1,019** | **2,058** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2022 | 943 | 1,033 | 1,976 |  | 1,041 | 1,072 | 2,113 |
| 2021 | 782 | 917 | 1,699 |  | 920 | 904 | 1,824 |
| 2020 | 883 | 1,155 | 2,038 |  | 754 | 710 | 1,464 |
| 2019 | 1,102 | 1,497 | 2,599 |  | 1,145 | 1,141 | 2,286 |
| 2018 | 1,102 | 1,587 | 2,689 |  | 1,175 | 1,154 | 2,329 |
| 2017 | 1,076 | 1,613 | 2,689 |  | 1,189 | 1,300 | 2,489 |
| 2016 | 1,172 | 1,735 | 2,907 |  | 1,308 | 1,298 | 2,601 |
| 2015 | 1,150 | 1,726 | 2,876 |  | 1,354 | 1,342 | 2,696 |
| 2014 | 1,188 | 1,907 | 3,093 |  | 1,288 | 1,331 | 2,619 |
| 2013 | 1,206 | 1,776 | 2,982 |  | 1,334 | 1,349 | 2,683 |
| 2012 | 1,178 | 1,911 | 3,089 |  | 1,264 | 1,341 | 2,605 |
| 2011 | 1,179 | 1,983 | 3,162 |  | 1,385 | 1,415 | 2,800 |

**Catechumens and Priests\***

|  |  | | |  |  | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | |  | |
|  | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |  | Jpn | For. | **Japanese** | **Foreign** |
| Sapporo | 20 | 44 | 64 |  | 15 | 1 | 15 | 12 |
| Sendai | 14 | 21 | 35 |  | 14 | 0 | 2 | 11 |
| Niigata | 6 | 9 | 15 |  | 13 | 1 | 4 | 11 |
| Saitama | 27 | 49 | 76 |  | 19 | 3 | 6 | 15 |
| Tokyo | 194 | 352 | 546 |  | 62 | 3 | 168 | 117 |
| Yokohama | 72 | 128 | 200 |  | 43 | 2 | 14 | 23 |
| Nagoya | 24 | 35 | 59 |  | 16 | 1 | 34 | 66 |
| Kyoto | 22 | 35 | 57 |  | 12 | 1 | 10 | 15 |
| Osaka-Takamatsu | 56 | 78 | 134 |  | 34 | 9 | 42 | 62 |
| Hiroshima | 30 | 50 | 80 |  | 19 | 5 | 12 | 19 |
| Fukuoka | 24 | 38 | 62 |  | 25 | 2 | 5 | 21 |
| Nagasaki | 14 | 33 | 47 |  | 94 | 2 | 29 | 13 |
| Oita | 4 | 17 | 21 |  | 16 | 4 | 9 | 10 |
| Kagoshima | 8 | 15 | 23 |  | 12 | 7 | 8 | 2 |
| Naha | 5 | 7 | 12 |  | 1 | 6 | 2 | 8 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **TOTAL 2023** | **520** | **911** | **1431** |  | **395** | **47** | **360** | **405** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  | |  |  |
| 2022 | 558 | 959 | 1531 |  | 437 | 62 | 327 | 466 |
| 2021 | 748 | 1,262 | 2,010 |  | 470 | 64 | 330 | 441 |
| 2020 | 749 | 1355 | 2,104 |  | 418 | 59 | 343 | 431 |
| 2019 | 1,016 | 1,824 | 2,840 |  | 419 | 62 | 339 | 438 |
| 2018 | 1,027 | 1,844 | 2,871 |  | 487 | 63 | 347 | 462 |
| 2017 | 1,012 | 1,893 | 2,905 |  | 498 | | 387 | 518 |
| 2016 | 946 | 1,944 | 2,890 |  | 495 | | 380 | 451 |
| 2015 | 1,019 | 2,149 | 3,168 |  | 496 | | 390 | 471 |
| 2014 | 1,202 | 2,338 | 3,540 |  | 489 | | 404 | 487 |
| 2013 | 1,180 | 2,500 | 3,680 |  | 503 | | 381 | 498 |
| 2012 | 1,178 | 2,569 | 3,747 |  | 499 | | 410 | 486 |

\*Bishops are included in the total for priests.

**Other Statistics**

Deacons: Diocesan .28

Religious/Missionary 5

Seminarians: Diocesan – major, native 15

– major, foreign 18

– minor, native 11

– minor, foreign 0

Religious – major, native 11

– major, foreign 3

– minor native 2

Brothers: Native 110

Foreign 28

Sisters: Native 3,732

Foreign 369

Secular Institutes Native 147

Foreign 3

Churches: Parishes 773

Mission stations 151

Religious Houses:

Men 147

Women 444

Mass Attendance: Sunday average 72,699

Easter 121,627

Christmas 158,042

Departures (move out from own Parish) 2,526

Entries (move into another Parish) 2,842

Deaths 4,774

Confirmations 2,985

Marriages Among Catholics 445

With a Christian of another denomination 65

With a non-Christian 453

Non-Catholic couples 120

Hospitals and clinics 25

Day Nurseries 97

Nursing Homes for the Elderly 78

Kindergartens 344

Primary Schools 53

Middle Schools 101

High Schools 116

Junior Colleges 12

Universities 31

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1. See ‘Lettre de Cyrille aux apocrisiaires de Constantinople,’ no. 2, in Palémon Glorieux, *Prénestorianisme en Occident* (Tournai: Desclée, 1959), 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter,* trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gilles Emery, OP, ‘Kenosis, Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas,’ *Nova et vetera* 17 (2019): 839-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Emery, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion: IV Die absolute Religion,* ed. Georg Lasson (Hamburg: Meiner, 1925), 157-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kroymann’s reading (rather than aevo) in *Corpus Christianorum* I, p. 493). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), 85-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge,* trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 190-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gottfried Thomasius, Christi Person und Werk: Darstellung der evangelisch-lutherischen Dogmatik vom Mittelpunkte der Christologie aus, 2 voll. (Erlangen, Theodor Bläsing, 1856-57). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wolfgang Friedrich Gess, *Die Lehre von der Person Christi entwickelt aus dem Selbstbewusstsein Christi und aus demZeugnisse der Apostel* (1856); *Christi Person und Werk nach Christi Selbstzeugniss und den Zeugnissen der Apostel* (Basel: Detloff, 1878). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dorothee Sölle, *Atheistisch an Gott glauben* (Freiburg: Walter, 1968), 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Serge Boulgakov, Du Verbe incarné (Paris: Aubier, 1943), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Pierre Grelot, *Les paroles de Jésus-Christ*, new ed. (Tournai: Desclée, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note that these two sentences indicate inclusivism and exclusivism in a nutshell. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.herder.de/communio/theologie/zur-rede-des-papstes-in-singapur-sind-religionen-sprachen/> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On John Paul II’s attitude to inter-faith dialogue see Sherwin/Kasimow 2000. On Ratzinger’s war on religious pluralism see Allen, 216-56. For the methods of the Dicastery under Pope Benedict XVI see the instructive correspondence published in Phan 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/09/the-pope-and-other-religions> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://x.com/BishStrickland/status/1834593957382095070> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Quotations from: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20181225_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220914-kazakhstan-congresso.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For an analysis and critique of Dupuis’ position see Schmidt-Leukel, 131-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See: <https://fatima.org/news-views/pope-francis-diversity-of-religions-is-willed-by-god/> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See also Riggert 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A similar judgment is found in Catherine Cornille’s magisterial work on the conditions for a fruitful interreligious dialogue, in which she underlines the need for ‘humility’ and ‘hospitality’ (Cornille 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. On the relation between inter-faith dialogue and religious pluralism see Schmidt-Leukel, 161-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, McGuire 2008; Gustafson 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The very same question needs to be raised in relation to Jacques Dupuis; see Schmidt-Leukel, 136-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Fabian Koh, ‘Youths must have “courage” to hold interreligious dialogues, take conversation to wider community: Pope Francis,’ *CNA*, 13 September 2024, Mediacorp (online). One Catholic priest and scholar, Brian Harrison, went so far as to ask whether the Pope could be justifiably denounced as a heretic given his remarks which Harrison felt undermined Catholic doctrine. The priest’s conclusion was in the negative, but only because of many other comments the pontiff had made that Harrison considered more aligned with official church teaching and also on account of the Pope’s devout Catholic lifestyle. See Brian Harrison, ‘Francis Doubles Down—but Has He Apostatized?,’ *OnePeterFive*, 20 September 2024 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. C. R. Altieri, ‘What did Pope Francis say in Singapore about religions as paths to God?,’ *The Catholic World Report*, 15 September 2024 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ‘Understood’ was spoken in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Transcription of Washington’s English translation of the Pope’s extemporaneous remarks as per the official video recording of the speech. ‘Singapore, Interreligious Meeting with Young People, 13 September 2024, Pope Francis,’ *Vatican News*—*English*, 13 September 2024 (online). The text reads more smoothly on the Vatican website: Pope Francis, ‘Interreligious Meeting with Young People: Address of His Holiness,’ The Holy See, 13 September 2024 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. These statements are transcribed in the original Italian from the same official video recording. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. I am well aware of the potentially offensive, condescending, and derogatory connotations associated with the term ‘non-Christian’ and use it in this essay only in a technical sociological sense as well as for convenience and ease of discussion. See Peter Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 99, 110n9. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogues and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 2010), 20-30, 122. The apophaticism of a pluralist perspective is elucidated in John Hick’s doctrine of God, in which Jesus is seen as having had a ‘sense of the presence of the heavenly Father’ which led him to the belief that he was dealing with none other than the benevolent, loving, righteous, and mighty God attested in Jewish religion. In Hick’s view, the doctrine of the Trinity emerged only later as Jesus’s more homespun beliefs and teachings about God were ‘philosophically transformed.’ Hick believes the supernatural personal presence experienced in Christian prayer is not that of God per se but that of an angel. See John Hick, *Who or What is God?: and Other Investigations* (London: SCM, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. E. Z.-K. Chua, *Experience, Culture and Religion in Systematic Theology: An Integrative and Pluriform Methodology* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2023), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Chua, *Experience, Culture and Religion*, 22-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Pope Francis,‘Message of the Holy Father to Participants in the International Meeting for Peace Organized by the Community of Sant’Egidio,’ The Holy See, 17 September 2024 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, ‘Emic and etic,’ *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 29 November 2020 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Chua, *Experience, Culture and Religion*, 110, 205-206, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Pope Francis, ‘Interreligious Meeting with the Sheikh and with the Representatives of the Different Religious Communities of the Country: Address of the Holy Father,’ The Holy See, 2 October 2016 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Pope Francis, ‘Reading of the Final Declaration and Conclusion of the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions: Address of His Holiness,’ The Holy See, 15 September 2022 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness to the Participants in the International Peace Conference,’ The Holy See, 28 April 2017 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness to the Participants in the International Peace Conference.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness to the Participants in the International Peace Conference.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Pope John Paul II, ‘Speech of the Holy Father at the Arrival Ceremony of Jubilee Pilgrimage,’ #2, The Holy See, 24 February 2000 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness to the Participants in the International Peace Conference.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Leo D. Lefebure, ‘Be Friends and Help the World: The Contributions of Pope Francis to Interreligious and Secular Relations,’ in *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue: Religious Thinkers Engage with Recent Papal Initiatives*, ed. Harold Kasimow and Alan Race (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 304-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Pope Francis, ‘Opening and Plenary Session of the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions: Address of His Holiness,’ The Holy See, 14 September 2022 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Pope Francis, ‘World Day of Prayer for Peace, “Thirst for Peace: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue”: Address of the Holy Father,’ The Holy See, 20 September 2016 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Pope Francis, ‘Meeting with the Bishops of Asia: Address of Pope Francis,’ The Holy See, 17 August 2014 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, ‘A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,’ 4 February 2019 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Pope Francis, ‘Reading of the Final Declaration and Conclusion of the “VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions”: Address of His Holiness,’ The Holy See, 15 September 2022 (online). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Further reading on interreligious dialogue: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue,* ed. Catherine Cornille(Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); *Understanding Interreligious Relations,* ed. David Cheetham, Dougles Pratt, and David Thomas(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); *Interfaith Dialogue: Global Perspectives,* ed.Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)